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Mystery

✓ JAMES WARREN, who gave you those exciting thrillers, *No Sleep At All* and *Prowl No More Lady*, now presents another story built for even greater success. It starts with the discovery of a gentleman dead in his bath. He is the famous actor Richard Winter—the great Winter, idol of every stage from Broadway to Moscow. And now what an ignominious end to a trail of glory—Macbeth dead in fourteen inches of soapy water! *She Fell Among Actors* is a vastly entertaining as well as a really baffling mystery. It has a first-class plot and excellent characters. And it is exciting. Definitely the best Warren yet.

By the Same Author

PROWL NO MORE LADY

NO SLEEP AT ALL

SH
JAM L



COLLINS

14 T. JAMES'S PLACE LONDON

FOR
KATH
TO HELP PULL A FEW NAILS OUT

W 1959

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CHAPTER ONE

I SUPPOSE you would say that it all started on the first night of Lewis' play at the Regent Theatre, an old mausoleum of a place which had been closed since the blitz. The acoustics were not good and the seats were hard. It was draughty. In fact, everything had been done to make the audience as uncomfortable as possible.

Yet on this night it was packed with celebrities who were eyeing each other in that sly way celebrities do, conscious always of the front they have to put up, laughing just a little too loudly and greeting one another a little too profusely. There were rows of them. Anna and I must have been the only two nonentities in the stalls. But then, of course, we had come to see Lewis' play and he wasn't anybody much as yet.

The rest of the audience had obviously turned out to see the great Richard Winter. The veteran star had been off the stage for three years and this evening he was to make a comeback. Everybody was wanting to know whether he still possessed the magic which had caused his name to be already a legend in the theatrical world. Secretly they hoped that Winter would come a purler, at least the actors in the audience did. He was not greatly liked in the profession.

As for Anna and I, we just wanted Lewis to have a big success. He was a very good friend of ours, and since he ate, drank, thought and dreamt the theatre we felt he certainly deserved a break. This play of his had been sent to all the managers in town and they had all returned it, some with compliments, some not. But that hadn't deterred Lewis. He had immense faith in himself and when he met Janet Winter he discovered someone who had an equal faith. She was only recently out of the academy, a fresh, attractive girl whom you couldn't pass up in a crowd. The two of them fell in love and she added her weight to the effort of getting Lewis' play on.

She showed it to her father, Richard Winter, and he was eventually persuaded to back it and take the leading rôle himself. Janet herself was billed as the ingenue and Lewis produced.

Anna was trying to show me where Noel Coward was sitting when there was a hush in the audience and the manager

of the theatre came in front of the curtain. He coughed into his hand, tugged at his shirt cuffs, and then said :

"Ladies and gentlemen, I regret to announce that owing to sudden indisposition Mr. Winter will be unable to appear to-night. His part will be taken by Mr. Gerald Carson."

He fumbled for the join in the curtain and then vanished. There was an excited hum from the stalls. The actors were secretly pleased. A man behind me said : "I knew the old boy would never do it. He must be older than God."

I turned to Anna.

"That sends Lewis' play down the drain," I said sadly.

But Anna didn't seem to think so. She'd read the script and she knew more about plays than I did.

The curtain went up, and for a time the audience was restless. I feared the worst. The play was a slow drama which got up steam gradually and it seemed that the customers might not wait for it to reach full pressure. But somehow they did and by the end of the second act they were openly enthusiastic and at the final curtain they gave it a big reception.

Anna was jubilant over having been right. On occasions like this it is never wise to remind her of when she has been wrong, so I said I was extremely lucky to have such a clever wife. A bit heavy-handed, I admit, but there was no need for her to make veiled cracks about sarcasm, which she did all the time we were stumbling our way up the gangway.

I went in search of my hat and coat and you could tell from the various remarks in the foyer that Lewis was all set for success. We waited to have a word with him, but he was surrounded with people. So we left a message to say we would be at Charlie's if he had the time for a quick drink.

Charlie's was a garish bar-cum-restaurant, patronised by many disreputable characters and a small handful of reputable ones. But all the bars in town were crowded these days, and Charlie's was the one place you could be sure of a seat.

We sat down at a table and Charlie himself brought the drinks. He had one of those ugly faces you don't quite believe are true when you first see them. He was usually pretty dirty-looking, too, but this evening he was resplendent in a clean white coat and his hair was plastered back tight.

"'Evenin', Mr. Warren. 'Evenin', Mrs. Warren. How are you keeping?"

I said I was all right, and Anna said she was all right, too.

"And the young fellow. How's he?"

"About to celebrate his first birthday," I said.

"Well, well," said Charlie. "That's nice. Must be exciting—watching him grow up."

I sipped my drink. "He won't grow up silently. That's his trouble."

"Keep you awake much?" Charlie gave a sort of grin.

"Too much for a tired policeman."

Anna said: "Don't you listen to him. He never gets up anyway."

"I'm the breadwinner," I said. "I'm entitled to some privileges."

Charlie smiled. "Been running many people in?"

"Business is pretty brisk, as a matter of fact. Thinking of opening up a few new jails."

Charlie saw someone else he knew and with a nod to us he walked off, his flat feet splaying at violent angles across the floor.

"This is lousy gin," said Anna, making a wry face.

"Serve you right. You ought to know better than to have gin in war-time."

"But, darling, you so seldom buy me one. I have to seize my opportunities." She gave one of those looks, patted her hair and went on drinking. "You know," she said presently, "I think it was strange that Winter didn't appear in the play."

"Probably had a cold."

"But he was the lead. Not many managements would have let the show go on without the lead."

"Said a lot for Lewis' play that it was still a success. That understudy wasn't exactly tremendous."

"But Winter backed the show. I mean—I don't understand it at all."

"Look, dear," I said. "My guess is that Winter was drunk. He's been away from the theatre for three years now and I happen to know he spent one of those years in an inebriates' home in Surrey."

Anna gazed at her empty glass pointedly.

"Perhaps you're right. . . . But if he was still drinking, why did he attempt to put the show on at all?"

"That's silly. You might as well ask why he tried to play

Hamlet three years back and fell into the orchestra pit in the middle of a soliloquy scene."

Anna still stared at her glass. "I suppose there's something in that. It's an awful pity. That part to-night would have suited him perfectly. . . . Did you say anything about buying me another drink, darling?"

I winced at the direct attack. "I didn't, Mrs. Warren. But I will. Only one, mind you."

I called Charlie and he brought a gin. Anna told him it was lousy stuff and asked if he made it out the back somewhere. Charlie looked very shocked.

"I have to buy what I can get, Mrs. Warren. 'Course I admit it ain't quite up to standard, but what can I do?"

"It's a racket," she said. "You ought to put my husband on to it."

"If you had the law on them, then there'd be no gin at all," said Charlie. "And I don't care for methylated spirits myself." He laughed at his own joke and asked what show we had been to.

"New play at the Regent," I said. "Damn good, too. Friend of ours wrote it."

"Oh," said Charlie, "the Regent. That ain't been open—not since the blitz. I saw something about it in the paper the other day. Wasn't old Richard Winter in it?"

"He was to have been," Anna told him. "But the understudy went on in his place at the last moment."

"You don't say. Took ill, I suppose. Nice old chap, Winter. Regular gentleman. Come in here once or twice when he was at the Regent about four years ago. Used to knock it back pretty much."

"That's what we think he'd been doing to-night," I said.

"You don't say." Charlie shook his head sadly. Then he shuffled off, still shaking his head. In his more sober moments he fancied himself as a philosopher, viewing the wicked world from behind his chromium-plated bar.

Five minutes later, Lewis came in, followed by Janet. She was a brunette with widely set eyes, high cheek bones, and a slim figure.

To-night she was wearing a black fur that made her sallow face look extraordinarily beautiful.

"Hello, there," said Lewis. "You know Janet?"

"By sight," I said.

"Two friends of mine," Lewis told her. "Mr. and Mrs.

Warren. You said you wanted to meet a detective. Well, he's one."

Janet gave us a terrific smile and sat down.

"The show was a big success," I said. "Let me congratulate the two of you."

"Me, too," said Anna.

We ordered some more drinks and Lewis leant back in his chair and dabbed his forehead with a handkerchief. He was the tall, fair type. Full sensitive lips and blue eyes.

"There were one or two sticky moments," he said. "But I think on the whole it went over all right. Didn't you think Janet was marvellous?" He reached out and held her hand.

We said we did. It was obviously a wonderful night for them.

"What happened to Winter?" I asked presently.

Lewis and Janet looked at each other. Then Lewis said: "Well, he's sort of disappeared."

"You mean he didn't turn up?" suggested Anna.

"We haven't seen him for two days," said Janet.

"That's funny," I said. "Where do you think he is?"

They both hesitated. "Shall we tell him?" said Lewis. Janet nodded.

"Well, it's this way," he said, taking a pull at his cigarette. "Everything went all right until—let me see—it's Monday to-day—yes, until last Friday. He'd been behaving perfectly. But Friday morning he was late. We waited and presently he arrived at the stage-door in a taxi——"

"He was drunk," said Janet. "I haven't seen him like that—not for years. But I expect you know what he was like before he retired?"

"Well," I said. "He was a little fond of the bottle."

"That's putting it very politely." She smiled. "People always do. They seem to imagine I'm sensitive about it. But they're quite wrong. He's my father and he's a great actor, but somehow we've never got on well together. I was very small when he left mother and I've never hit it off with Christine."

"You mean the second Mrs. Winter?"

"Yes. She didn't like me, either. So when I left school I went and lived by myself."

"Anyway," continued Lewis. "He was very drunk. We had to cancel the rehearsal that morning and we left him in one of the dressing-rooms to sleep it off. In the afternoon he'd

disappeared. The next day he didn't show up and I was worried. You see, he was responsible for the financial side of the production and—well—there were bills and things to be paid. The following day——”

“Sunday?” I prompted.

“That's right. On the Sunday, Janet ran him to earth at the old house in Hampstead.”

“He and Christine have moved from there for the last three months,” explained Janet. “I told him how worried Lewis was and he said he would see to things but that he didn't feel he could play in the show.”

“Why not?” asked Anna.

Charlie arrived with some drinks.

“I don't know,” said Janet. “On the next morning—this morning, Lewis got a letter to say that everything had been arranged with the bank and that all was well. Neither of us have seen him since.”

“That's odd,” I said.

“Not really if you knew father. He was terribly temperamental. I expect some little thing had upset him. The main thing is that it didn't ruin the show.”

“It certainly didn't,” I said.

“But he seemed to crack up all of a sudden.” Lewis drank the remains of a whisky. “That was what was so peculiar. I think it was something to do with those two notes.”

“Notes?” I queried.

“On Tuesday and Wednesday father got a letter,” said Janet. “Lewis feels sure that they made him change his mind. But I don't think there's anything in it myself. . . . It's half-past ten, Lewis. I think we ought to be getting on to David's party if we're going.”

“All right,” said Lewis. “Well, thanks a lot, both of you, for coming along and clapping.”

“Drop in and see us one night soon,” said Anna. “And I hope you have some good notices. You deserve them.”

“He will,” said Janet. “I'm sure of it. It's been so nice meeting you. You'll excuse us rushing off, won't you?”

We all shook hands and then Lewis and Janet left, arm in arm.

We didn't stay much longer. The place was getting noisy. All the Allied Nations seemed to be sitting round the bar and

Charlie was having a hell of a time understanding what they wanted.

When we got outside, it was pitch black. Luckily Anna had remembered her torch, and except for grazing an odd lamp-post we got back to Soho Square without incident.

"Won't it be wonderful," said Anna, as we climbed the stairs to the flat. "Won't it be wonderful when there isn't any black-out."

I said it would be. "We shall all have to wear dark glasses at night."

Our arrival into the flat was heralded by loud squawls from the youngest member of the family. It was usually difficult for us to have an evening out, but two weeks ago we had discovered an elderly spinster living on the floor below who said she would just love to look after the baby any night we wanted. She was here now, a dour, bespectacled creature with a pinched face.

Anna took off her coat.

"Has he been any trouble, Miss Pain?"

Miss Pain beamed through her spectacles.

"He's been a lamb. Positively a lamb. Not a sound from him until just now. . . . You did tell me his name but you know I've quite forgotten it."

"John," said Anna, and then went on to tell Miss Pain how kind it was of her to come in for the evening.

"Oh, I don't mind at all. You see, I can always read a book and the little chap's quite company for me."

She departed in a flurry and we were left alone to deal with Master John Warren. He was in one of his petulant moods when he just wanted to squawl and squawl and squawl. We did everything we knew to get him to calm down, even inducing Buzz, the cat, to peer into the cot and allow his tail to be pulled. All to no purpose.

It was nearly two hours before he finally settled. Our tempers were raw and we were both very tired. We climbed into bed and prayed he would sleep through the night.

We reckoned without the telephone. At four o'clock it rang. That woke John and as soon as he was properly conscious he realised that he was hungry. He began to tell the world about it.

I padded into the lounge and lifted the receiver.

"Is that Warren?" It was McKay, the chief of the

special section of the C.I.D. to which I was attached. "I hev a job for ye," he said in his pronounced Scots' burr.

"Can't it wait till the morning, sir?"

"It's a job out at Hampstead," he persisted.

"Aren't there any police at Hampstead?" I was more than a little annoyed. He had a habit of springing things like this on me.

"Aye, I know how ye feel, but this is important. It may only be an accident."

"They're all like that," I said. "Why can't people die in their beds in a respectable manner?"

"This one died in his bath," said McKay with a chuckle. "The point is I've had special instructions that it must be handled verra carefully. Wee bit of string pulling behind the scenes, ye understand?"

"So it's one of those?" I said. "All right, sir. I'll get dressed. Where exactly is it?"

He gave me a Hampstead address and then asked how John was.

"He'll get convulsions if he screams much louder," I said.

"Ah, the rascal! I'll be coming round to see him one of these days. . . . Remember me to your wife."

He rang off. I returned to the bedroom and started getting into my clothes. It is not nice getting into any kind of clothes at four in the morning and I was in a mood to bemoan my fate. I began to think how much better it would be to have a job with regular hours. They said that crime didn't pay. It certainly didn't—from the angle of the police.

"Not off again," said Anna as she came into the room. "I wonder you don't take your bed down to the station and down with it."

"I can't help it," I said. "I have to go to Hampstead to see somebody who's dead."

She smiled as I struggled with my tie. "Good-bye," she said. "Shall I see you at breakfast?"

"You may. You may indeed."

I put on a coat and walked to the door.

"Hope you enjoy yourself. Drop in again sometime," she said. "It's always nice for the child to meet its father."

I kissed her. "If you don't attend to it quickly it'll burst its lungs," I said.

I managed to find a taxi after a bit of searching. The

driver raised a groan about going to Hampstead, but the bribe of a double fare and the sight of my warrant card changed his mind.

In about ten minutes we had stopped outside a large gaunt house. I paid the driver and stumbled up the steps to the front door. I noticed a wide stretch of garden and a high wall separated it from the next house.

There was a constable on the door. I told him who I was and he stepped aside to let me pass.

"Who's dead?" I asked.

"Actor," he said. "Chap called Richard Winter."

"My God," I said, and began to remember what Lewis had told me.

Inside I found a uniformed inspector in charge of things. He was very spruce and very military. With him was a special constable with a very Oxford accent.

"Evening, sergeant," said the inspector. "The doctor's on his way and I took the precaution of sending for the fingerprints people."

"Good," I said. "It'll be like a three-ringed circus."

He ignored this and said: "Would you want to look at the body first?"

"I'd rather hear how it was found."

The dim hall smelled musty. There were Napoleonic cartoons on the wall and a large grandfather clock which creaked with every swing of its pendulum. The effect was eerie and I shivered slightly.

"Now, Sanders," said the inspector to the special constable. "Tell the sergeant exactly how you found the body."

"Well," said the special constable, looking down his nose at me. "I was on this beat. I come on two evenings a week, you know. I'm part-time. I was passing here about three o'clock when I thought I saw someone in the garden."

"Was there someone in the garden?" I asked.

"I don't know." Sanders seemed vaguely offended. "However, I went to look and naturally I tried the front door. To my surprise it was open, unlocked."

"Was the door actually ajar, or was it latched?"

"Actually ajar."

"All right," I said. "Go on."

"I thought I had better investigate. I went through the house and when I came to the bathroom I found the light on

and a man in the bath. I could tell he was dead. So I immediately phoned the station from here."

"I see," I said. "Thanks very much. Now, inspector, I'd like to look at the body."

We went up the wide stairs. It was all sombre and gloomy. Victorian furnishing with yards of plush and heavy, over-ornate furniture. At the top of the stairs was a signed portrait of Ellen Terry and on the other side a horrible coloured picture of Irving.

He pushed open a door along the corridor. The light was on.

I was surprised to see a completely modern bathroom with a sunk bath and a shower. Lying in the bath, quite naked, was Richard Winter.

You couldn't fail to recognise that classic countenance, even though the face was bloated and the head hanging at an unnatural angle.

He was not a pretty sight. Fatter than you would imagine, his arms absurdly thin. The famous Roman nose was mottled with red patches and he was quite bald. Evidently on the stage, apart from wearing corsets, he wore a wig.

I remembered seeing him as Macbeth when I was seventeen, his handsome, war-like appearance, his magnificent command of blank verse. He'd seemed a sort of hero then, at the height of his fame with autograph hunters haunting the stage door. Women going crazy over him, mobbing his car when he arrived in the evenings. The great Winter! Idol of every stage from Broadway to Moscow.

No, I couldn't believe this was the same man. Not this obese, under-developed creature. Yet it was, of course. It seemed an ignominious end to such a trail of glory. Macbeth lying dead in fourteen inches of soapy water.

I must have been silent for some time. The inspector coughed and said: "Well?"

"Looks as though he drowned," I said. "Tell more when the doctor arrives."

I glanced around the bathroom. All the usual objects. Nail-brushes, tooth-paste, a sponge and an array of little bottles of disinfectant and mouth-wash on the glass shelves. The panels over the bath were glass, too. Glass cut with a design of waves and fish.

On the wall hung an old dressing-gown, a suit—the trousers

suspended by braces from the peg, and a battered wide-brimmed hat.

There was the noise of footsteps on the stairs and the doctor appeared.

He was a nervous, short little man with spectacles and a perpetual cold. This cold had reduced his nose to a ripe strawberry colour.

"This is a hell of a time to get anybody out?" he snapped. "You again, Warren. You seem to like early morning sessions. Why the blazes don't you kill 'em off at a reasonable hour?"

He gave what was meant to be a smile, nodded curtly at the inspector, and set down his bag. Slowly and methodically he examined Richard Winter. We both watched him.

Then I lit a cigarette.

"Have you let anybody else know about this?" I asked the inspector.

"I phoned his brother, Sir Adrian Winter, and his wife, Mrs. Winter."

Sir Adrian was a big, important man. Head of several armament factories. On half a dozen production committees. A man very close to the government. I began to understand what McKay meant. Naturally it would have to be handled tactfully. Sir Adrian wouldn't want any scandal. He probably disapproved of his brother, Richard, heartily. To men of Sir Adrian's calibre, the stage was not quite respectable.

The doctor sighed and straightened up.

"He was drowned. That's my initial diagnosis. Seems to have been drinking heavily. At least, that's what I'd say."

"Any idea how it happened?" I asked.

The doctor took off his spectacles, held them up to the light, and then put them on again.

"Well, he's got a pretty nasty bruise on his head."

"If he'd been drunk and slipped while in the bath, d'you think he could have knocked himself out and drowned that way?"

"It's possible." The doctor had an irritating habit of appearing immensely superior to any suggestions from outside. "But it's not very likely. You look at the bruise."

I saw what he meant. The bruise was high up on the back of the head and the skin was lacerated. Scarcely the sort of place you made by hitting yourself on the edge of a bath.

"Perhaps he did it before he got into the bath," I said.

"What about the geyser? Could there have been any fumes from that?"

The uniform inspector had just come through the door. "Talking of fumes?" he asked. "I thought of that myself. But there couldn't have been any."

"Why not?"

"The gas was disconnected from this house over two months ago."

"Well, that settles that," I said.

The doctor laughed. "He must have been a tough old boy to take a cold bath at this time of the year."

There was a silence. Then the uniformed inspector said: "I bet a fiver he never did."

I began to think that, too. Winter wasn't the type who would crack the ice in the Serpentine and go for a swim. Beside, why should he suddenly return to this house where he hadn't lived for three months, calmly take off his clothes and have a bath? A cold one, at that. It didn't make sense. True, he was probably drunk. But I didn't feel that all the alcohol in the world could give a satisfactory explanation.

"About what time d'you reckon he died, doc?"

"Damn it, I can't tell you that until I've done a p.m.!"

"Roughly," I persisted. "Just an estimate."

"About four days, I should say. And not less than three."

He snapped his bag shut and flicked some dust off his coat.

Three days. Yet Janet had said she'd seen her father on Sunday morning, forty-eight hours ago. The doctor might be wrong, but he was a cagey bird. He always knew more than he told you.

I began to get intrigued. It didn't look like an accident any more. It looked . . . but Janet had said Sunday distinctly. Damn it, I thought, you can't talk to a dead man or can you?

CHAPTER TWO

THE fingerprints boys arrived, dusted everything, took a lot of pictures, and then departed. The ambulance was waiting outside in the street to take Winter to the mortuary. They'd wanted to move the body at once, but I said it was better to leave it until Mrs. Winter arrived.

I went through every room in the house. Most of them were covered in dust sheets. Only what I took to be Winter's own room showed any signs of recent habitation. There was a suitcase open on the bed and some suits lying beside it, a pile of money on the dressing-table, and two half-smoked cigars stubbed out in an ashtray. The bed had not been slept in for some time.

On a chair reclined the wig that Winter wore in life. A symbol of two people. The actor and the man. I knew the actor. I'd seen him play. But the man . . . ?

What sort of person was the Richard Winter who had walked out through the stage-door every night? I knew that he drank heavily. Why he had done that I didn't know. In fact, I knew nothing. That was the trouble. It was not like dealing with an ordinary man at all.

I wandered down the stairs again and into the drawing-room. I pulled the dustcovers off the chairs. It was more like a salon than anything else. Louis XIV furniture, elegant, impractical. Furniture made for exaggerated manners, for a race of people apart. Men with high heels and women with their hair dressed in absurd, mountainous decoration.

In the corner was a Boulle pedestal clock, delicately ornate. From the ceiling hung a glass chandelier. The chairs were gilt and tapestry.

Was this Richard Winter? Had he sat here, poised on one of these chairs discussing the merits of a new play? Somehow I couldn't imagine it.

By the fireplace was a bookcase containing French classics. Beautifully bound editions of Balzac, Molière, Zola, and Anatole France. I pulled out one of the Balzac, and I was surprised to find that the pages were uncut. Evidently nobody had ever read it. I put the book back and took out another one. It was the same. Just as it had come from the publishers.

I was jerked out of my thoughts by the sound of voices in the hall. A detective constable came into the room, his feet making no noise on the thick carpet. McKay had sent him down to give me a hand. He was an amusing, likeable chap called Elliot. Fond of women and possessed of a Rabelaisian sense of humour that had set his thick lips in a perpetual grin.

"This is a fine old business," he said. "Mrs. Winter has just arrived. Shall I take her up and show her what remains of her late lamented?"

"Yes, of course," I said.

"He don't look a very pretty sight. Better put a blanket over the bottom half, hadn't I?" He gave me a wink.

"Perhaps you'd better."

"Okay, sergeant. . . . By the way, have you heard that one about the sultan and his eunuchs?"

"No," I said. "And I don't want to hear it now. You take Mrs. Winter upstairs and then bring her down to me."

"Righto." He went out into the hall.

I heard a woman's voice and then footsteps climbing the stairs. Through the french windows I saw the glimmering headlights of the ambulance. The driver had started up the engine. He revved it up and down because it was cold. The long strip of garden was in darkness and you couldn't see the police who were standing there, waiting to take Winter away.

I sat down in one of the chairs and presently Elliot appeared again. His face was still set in a grin. He saw something funny in everything. Even death amused him.

"She's coming down," he said. "Didn't half create when she saw him. Wept all over the place till her face was streaked with eye-black. Strange how women never forget to make up. In the raids I pulled some of 'em out of wreckage and the first thing they did was to reach for their handbags. Even if they hadn't any clothes they'd stop and smear on some lipstick. . . ."

He walked back to the door and escorted Mrs. Winter into the room. She was dressed in a smart black tailor-made costume and a blouse with a white ruffle collar. She had a good figure. Bit on the plump side. Her dark hair hung straight and was cut in a Colbert fringe. She must have been about thirty.

"This is Detective-sergeant Warren," said Elliot. "He's in charge of the inquiry."

"How do you do," she said, holding out a gloved hand.

I took it and stared into her eyes. They were red and tear-stained.

"All right, Elliot," I said. "The ambulance men can get busy."

Elliot nodded and left the room.

"You don't mind if I sit down," she said, toying with a small handkerchief. "But it's been such a shock. . . . How did it happen?"

"I don't know, Mrs. Winter. That's what I'm here for. To find out. . . . Now, do you mind if I ask you a few questions?"

She dabbed at her face with the handkerchief.

"All right," she said.

"When did you last see your husband?"

She paused. "Well, we live now in a flat in Park Street, you know. It was so difficult to get servants, so we decided to close down this big place until the war's over. You know, of course, that he was to appear in this new play?"

I told her I'd been at the first night.

"I don't suppose it'll be a success without Richard," she said.

I didn't disillusion her.

She continued: "He was such a great actor . . . such a great actor." She intoned the words like a prayer.

"Quite so," I said. "The last of a famous tradition."

"I can't believe it's true. I can't believe it's really Richard lying up there. . . ." She broke off into sobs and I waited for her to compose herself.

Police were carrying a stretcher through the hall and down the steps. "Mind out! What are you trying to do? Squash me against the bleedin' wall!"

I got up and shut the door and their voices became a distant buzz. The engine of the ambulance was still being revved up and down.

In a moment she looked at me.

"I'm sorry," she said. "What were you asking me?"

"When did you last see your husband?"

"It would be Wednesday. You see, I was going down into the country to visit some friends. I left him at the flat."

"And you didn't see him after that?"

"No."

"Did you know that he wasn't going to act in the play, that he disappeared from the theatre on Friday morning?"

"Yes. Janet rang me up to ask if I knew where he was."

"And did you know?"

"I told her she was behaving stupidly. I felt sure he would show up. He never let a play down in his life before."

The body had been placed in the ambulance. There was a grinding of gears as the car drove away from the house.

"Have you been back to the flat since last Wednesday?"

She shook her head. "I've just come up from the country."

"I see. . . . Now, Mrs. Winter, can you explain why your husband should return here and take a bath, a cold bath?"

The question disconcerted her. There was a pause before she answered.

"Sometimes he was not quite himself. He needed looking after like a child. . . . I can't say why he should do that, but he was apt to be eccentric now and then. . . . Why are you asking me all these questions? It was an accident, wasn't it?"

"I don't know," I said. "The circumstances are a little strange, Mrs. Winter. And I have to make a satisfactory statement to the coroner."

"I see." She smoothed down her skirt. Her eyes were watching me all the time.

"How long had you and Mr. Winter been married, Mrs. Winter?"

"Eight years. It was a romance, you know." She turned her face away toward the french windows. "I had just left the academy and I was mad on the theatre. I wanted so much to be a success. . . . Richard was one of my heroes. He was acting in Shakespeare at the time. I sat in the stalls every night for a week, and at the end of that week I somehow knew I would never climb to his heights. I would only be a mediocre actress. . . . I was desperately disappointed and I tried hard to persuade myself that I was wrong, but it was useless. I have never been any good at deluding myself and I realised I would have to face the fact that my ambitions were beyond my reach."

"And then?" I prompted.

"At a party I met Richard. We fell in love and at the end of a month he asked me to marry him. He did so need someone to look after him. . . . And, well, we had a quiet honeymoon and settled down here. We were very happy."

Richard was such an artistic person. He wasn't only interested in the theatre. He liked literature, music, painting. On the stage he went from success to success. He always said he owed everything to me. . . . You see, he was impatient over the small things. He hated talking business and arranging terms. I did all that for him."

I wondered what connection there was between the man she described and the man who had died in the bath upstairs. I could see her as an ardent young student falling for a great actor. I could see him preening himself amid her fulsome flattery. I could imagine, too, the way she had of managing things. Yes, it was all quite clear. Her relations with the actor were obvious. But the man . . . ?

"Mr. Winter had been married before, hadn't he?" I asked.

"Yes . . . but his first wife left him. She's in America now. She never really understood him, I'm sure. She was selfish. She didn't make any allowances for his genius. She'd left him several years before I first met him. He never spoke of her. He wanted to wipe the memory from his brain. I think she made him very unhappy."

Suddenly I became conscious of a slight noise outside the french windows. Swiftly I got up and crossed the room. I flung open the windows. There was no one there, but I had a queer feeling that there had been a moment ago.

I stepped into the darkness. For a second I stood there straining my ears for any sound. I thought I heard a swish as though someone were pushing through the shrubbery on to the grass.

Whoever it was had got away and I knew it would be futile to try and follow. I returned to the room and shut the windows.

Mrs. Winter was leaning forward in her seat, her brows furrowed in a frown.

"What was that?" she asked anxiously.

"Thought we had a visitor," I said. "But I think I was wrong."

"A visitor?"

"Someone trying to get in through the french windows."

"Oh, I see. . . . Could it have been one of the policemen?"

"Hardly," I said.

I opened the door into the hall and called for Elliot. He

was sitting on an oak settee by the grandfather clock, reading a newspaper.

"Put a couple of men out there in front," I said. "See if you can pick up anyone."

"Why, have you heard something, sergeant?"

"Yes," I said.

"Might be the press. They've smelled out Winter's death already. Been a couple of them on the phone."

"You didn't tell them anything?"

"I told them there'd be a hand-out later from the Press Bureau." His eyes twinkled. "I'll take a couple of the locals, shall I? High-class War Reserves they have here in Hampstead. That fellow who found Winter is a B.B.C. announcer. He's going to give me lessons in voice production."

"Go on," I said. "Get moving."

"Okay, sarge." He slid off the seat, pocketed his newspaper, and went to the front door.

I went back into the drawing-room. Mrs. Winter was standing by the writing desk. I began to feel that her grief had evaporated. Perhaps she had visions of herself in the future as the guardian of the Winter legend, holding anniversary celebrations, writing a biography of the great man, keeping his name alive, and graciously attending first nights.

"Well, I think I've told you everything," she said.

"Not quite, Mrs. Winter. I'm afraid I shall have to trouble you a little longer. Tell me, this new play was to have been your husband's return to the stage after three years, wasn't it?"

She nodded. "Yes. You see, three years ago he had been on a world tour. He had overdone things and he collapsed with a nervous breakdown. I decided that he must have a long rest."

Did she really think I believed that? Did she imagine I knew nothing of the drunken bouts into which Winter had sunk? I couldn't tell from watching her. I had the feeling that she was posing, reciting a story fit only for a publicity blurb. A story that she would tell again and again to worshippers at the shrine of the great actor. Suddenly I realised that her personality matched the exotic elegance of the room. I was sure she had chosen that furniture because, in her own mind, she regarded it as the right background for a genius.

"For a year he was in a nursing home," she said. "Then he grew stronger and the doctors said he might come home. So I brought him back here and for the last two years up to now he had led a very quiet existence. . . . He was fond of listening to concerts on the radio, and he loved his books. Together we planned his future productions. There was never any question of his not going back to the stage. That was his life, you understand. Occasionally we had a few friends to dinner and discussed old times. Richard was concerned about the world, you know. He felt that it was destroying itself. I remember when the war started he stood by the windows there and said to me: "Christine, the curtain is going up on chaos. Nothing will ever be the same again."

"It was hard for him, really. He didn't understand the new movements which are sweeping the world. Why should he? He was an artist. He had devoted his life to the theatre and he was sad when he saw it declining like everything else. The raids worried him, too. He had such a sensitive disposition. He would just sit in that chair and go very white and strained-looking. The night there was a bomb over the road he couldn't get any rest at all. Hours after the 'all-clear' had sounded he paced this room. You see, two of his friends had been killed. It was a long time before he really recovered from the shock."

"That must have been bad for him," I said. "Can you explain why he disappeared from the theatre last Friday. I mean, has he ever done anything like that before?"

There was a moment's hesitation. Then she said: "No, never. I was very surprised when Janet rang me up. I privately thought that she might have upset him. She had so little reverence where he was concerned. I myself was against his doing the play with Janet in it. They weren't like father and daughter at all. When she lived here she was always rude to him. She never appreciated how kind he was to her."

There were tears again now in her eyes. It was as though she had suddenly remembered she was the sorrowing widow.

"I feel I ought not to have left him," she said sadly. "I shall reproach myself always for that. But he seemed so fit and well and the production was going just as he wanted. I was tired and I needed a change. He suggested my going to the country for a few days and I didn't think there was any harm in my going. . . . But you could never tell with him."

He was so easily thrown off his balance. He had a true artistic temperament." She stopped speaking and dabbed at her eyes. The handkerchief was pitifully inadequate for any genuine grief, but she managed very well with it.

I had a strong impression that she was not sorry he was dead. Her reminiscences came so easily and there was almost a sense of relief that she was able to use the past tense when referring to him. "I should never have gone," she said. "I blame myself."

"But you mustn't do that, Mrs. Winter. You see, I don't think he died naturally."

She swung round quickly, her eyes wide open and her mouth set in a thin line.

"Whatever do you mean by that?"

"I don't think it was an accident, Mrs. Winter. We shall know more later but I am proceeding on the assumption that your husband was deliberately drowned in that bath."

That shook her. For a moment she was so surprised she could say nothing. Her face changed. Ugly marks of anger developed under the make-up.

"No," she said in a whisper. "That's impossible. Deliberately drowned! Why, how ridiculous! Who would want to do such a thing? It's a dreadful suggestion. I can't imagine what put that into your head. I suppose the police always place the worst possible construction on everything. I did think that you would have shown a little more understanding. Richard's brother, Sir Adrian, telephoned me before I came here and assured me that things would be handled tactfully. After all, Richard was no ordinary person. His name is known over the entire world. The least we can do is to see that there are no opportunities for scandal!"

It was going to be difficult. I saw that. But I was determined not to be side-tracked.

"Mrs. Winter," I said, "I don't want to start any scandal. In fact, you may rely on me for the utmost discretion. Nevertheless, I am a policeman. I am here to discover why and how Richard Winter died. Until I get a satisfactory explanation of that I shall have to continue my investigations. I fully understand that tact is necessary, but tact does not mean suppression of evidence. On the present facts no coroner in England would give a verdict of accidental death."

She sank into a chair. She seemed stunned by the thought that her husband could have been murdered. At least, she

gave the appearance of being stunned. I was rapidly wondering if her valuation of herself as a mediocre actress didn't err more than somewhat on the side of modesty.

"I see," she said. "Of course, I understand. Is there anything else you want me to tell you?"

"In Mr. Winter's room there is a suitcase. Evidently he had been packing some clothes. Can you suggest why he should have done that?"

It may have been imagination, but I felt sure I saw fear in her eyes.

"No . . . well, yes, I can. You see, when we moved he didn't take all his clothes with him and he kept saying he would come and fetch the rest by degrees."

"And there is one other question. Mr. Winter left the theatre on Friday afternoon. Do you know where he might have gone between then and the time when he died?"

She thought for a moment, her hands still clutching the small handkerchief.

"I suppose he went back to the flat."

"I don't think so, Mrs. Winter," I said. "Has he ever disappeared in this way before?"

"No never."

"Was there any particular place that he went to, any haunt that he frequented?"

"Not that I know of. I've told you he spent the last three years very quietly. He didn't like crowds. He was happiest when he was here alone. When there were only the two of us in the house. Once or twice we went to first nights, but they only depressed him. He was convinced that the theatre was dying and the quality of the plays appalled him. And when you feel like that it is better to live more in the past. He had such a glorious past. He never tired of talking of it."

She went to the desk, a masterpiece of its kind. Delicately poised on eight curved legs, the front rounded and inlaid with a design in metal. She pulled open one of the drawers.

"In here are all his press cutting books," she said. "You can look through them if you like. Some of them are in foreign languages, but the translations are alongside. They will tell you more about Richard Winter than I can. . . ."

She put her hands in front of her eyes. "He isn't really dead, you know. He'll never die. That's what I'm telling myself. No great artist ever dies."

She was off again, off on the path that intrigued her most.

She had forgotten about Richard Winter really. She was concerned only with his legend. She had frustrated all the attempts I had made to discover anything about the man himself. At every turn she had pushed up the actor and resolutely refused to discuss the human being.

What could I do ?

She obviously knew more than she had told me. I even suspected that everything she had said was a carefully fabricated lie. I just didn't believe in her picture of Winter. She had painted him as a kindly old gentleman amid his books, his pictures and his radio, with herself worshipping at his feet. She had made no mention of his weakness. From her account he might never have touched a drop of alcohol, never been drunk in his whole life. It was ridiculous. Yet I couldn't tell her flatly she was lying. That would have made things worse than ever.

With an ordinary person it would have been different. You could break them down, cross-examine them until they told the truth. But McKay had said tact was necessary. That meant there was powerful influence being brought to bear from somewhere, and I suspected it was from Sir Adrian Winter. I would have to watch my step. I would have to be careful every inch of the way, or else I'd find myself facing all sorts of charges.

The more I looked at that room, the more certain I was that Richard Winter had never lived in it. It was a theatrical set-piece designed by Christine Winter to frame her conception of the great man.

"Is there anything else ?" she asked.

"I'd like you just to wait a little while longer, if you don't mind, Mrs. Winter."

She sat down again and at the same moment I noticed the french windows quivering slightly. I was quicker this time. I raced across the room and pulled them open. I saw a figure move swiftly away. Without stopping, I gave chase. I could scarcely see anything because I hadn't a torch with me, but it was getting lighter now and I could just distinguish the silhouette of the figure in front.

I crashed through the shrubbery and across a flower bed on to the grass. The figure stumbled and I managed to catch up. It was a man. I got hold of his coat and swung him round.

"What the hell are you doing here ?" I asked.

For answer he lunged his fist at me. I side-stepped and got a tighter hold on his coat. As I did so I tripped. I tried hard to regain my balance, but it was no use. I was toppling over and dragging him with me. For what seemed seconds we hung in the air. I expected a hard jolt, but none came. Instead there was a splash and I felt ice cold water seeping through my clothes. We had evidently fallen into a pond of some description. It seemed to be fairly deep, too.

The man was trying to get away and I was trying to hang on to him. He began to press me down in the water. Presently it was swirling round my face, stagnant and slimy. I fought back madly, but he had the advantage and steadily my face sank lower. With a vicious twist he had me still further down. I gulped and took a mouthful of foul water.

The thought flashed across my consciousness that Winter had drowned, too. Was this the way it had happened? His head held under until his lungs were full. I was determined not to go out like that. I spluttered and coughed and struck back at the man.

Once more he exerted all his strength and I found myself sinking deeper and deeper. This time my head went right under. My right hand, reaching for the bottom of the pond, buried itself in mud and slime. My lungs were bursting when suddenly he drove his fist into my stomach. I gasped and sank. It was a horrible sensation.

After that I didn't know any more.

CHAPTER THREE

I CAME round to find myself lying on the grass and Elliot and two War Reserves bending over me. I was sodden and it was unpleasantly cold. I shivered and stared up at Elliot.

"I thought you'd kicked the bucket, sarge," said Elliot. "What the devil happened?"

I was about to tell him what I thought in very lurid language when I was violently sick. To swallow water of any kind is disconcerting, but to swallow water that is stagnant and full of the most unmentionable slime is worse than anything I know.

It was some minutes before I was capable of any coherence. Then I swore at Elliot. "Why the hell did you let the bastard escape?"

"It's not my fault," said Elliot. "I can't be everywhere at once." He gazed scornfully at the War Reserves. "If you'd given me some policemen it wouldn't have happened."

"All right," I said. "Well, it's too late now. I suppose he climbed over the wall?"

Elliot nodded. "Eustace here," jerking his head at one of the War Reserves, "was standing right by the wall. I suppose he was afraid of taking the crease out of his trousers."

The War Reserve coughed. "I have an infirmity," he said. "I suffer from night blindness. I've told them at the station several times, but they will persist in putting me on night duty."

"Too bad!" I said, pulling some damp mush out of my hair. "I wonder they don't send down a couple of specials with cork legs. We'd be complete then." I grasped the cigarette that Elliot passed to me. "Okay, you can get back to your posts, both of you. And don't let anything slip past you next time."

They stumbled off across the grass.

Elliot said: "Was that the bloke who done Winter in?"

"Don't know," I said. "Nasty similarity about the technique. Did he leave anything behind?"

Elliot nodded. "He left his titfer." He held up a glistening black bowler hat. "Got a large head, he has. So large he's cut the leather band out of the inside."

I sat up and looked at the hat. It didn't look any different from the millions you see emerging from the Underground any morning. "That's fine," I said. "We shall have no difficulty in tracing him at all. Just find a man with a head that takes seven in hats. It's so beautifully simple!"

"No need to be sarcastic," said Elliot. "If I hadn't pulled you out of that pond you might have died. I think it was a very brave thing to do considering I cannot swim."

I snorted with disgust. "It was two feet deep," I said. "You certainly deserve a medal."

He helped me up from the grass and we went back towards the house. I was dripping water like an old piece of seaweed. The uniformed inspector met me on the door and wanted to know what had happened. My patience was exhausted and I said a couple of rude words and continued into the hall and up the stairs.

I took off everything and then grabbed an old dressing-

gown of Winter's and swathed it about me. This seemed to delight Elliot who said it was getting more like Sherlock Holmes every moment. "But you need a bent pipe," he added.

I let this pass since the dressing-gown was too small for me and it was impossible to be dignified in such a garment. Together we descended the stairs and went into the drawing-room.

Mrs. Winter was still there. She got up when we entered.

"What happened?" she asked anxiously.

"I fell into the pond," I said.

"That is Richard's dressing-gown," she observed, going white. "He wore that in Chicago ten years ago."

"I will treat it very reverently," I said. "It shall be returned to you as soon as I can get back and fetch dry clothes."

"Was it really someone—outside the french windows?" she asked.

I said it was. "He left his hat behind." I brandished the bowler. "I suppose you don't recognise it by any chance?"

"No," she said. "No, I'm afraid I don't."

As she said it I watched her face. She was so astonished by the appearance of the hat that her acting failed for the moment. Her expression gave her away. She obviously knew whose hat it was.

I wondered what it all meant. If only I could drive her into a corner, smash down the phoney façade she was putting up! But I knew that would cost me my job, and I wasn't sticking my neck out that far.

An hour later, Sir Adrian Winter arrived. It was light by then. He came in an enormous black saloon, driven by a chauffeur and with a large priority sticker on the wind-screen. I thought that if God turned up on the fatal day he would come rather like this.

Sir Adrian got out of the car and walked hurriedly up the path to the house. With him he brought an atmosphere of transcontinental telephones, feverish cables, and all the paraphernalia of big business. Actually all he carried was an umbrella, but you got the feeling that the rest was only just around the corner.

He was a handsome creature, tall and upright. A square-

cut face and piercing steel-blue eyes under a mass of greying hair.

We met in the hall. I apologised for appearing in a dressing-gown but explained how I had fallen into the pond. He seemed to think this was funny. He laughed for three seconds and then his face set again in its hard mould.

"Well, I suppose the whole business is cleared up?" he asked.

"No," I said. "We haven't completed our investigations."

"A simple sort of accident, wasn't it?"

"That's what we're trying to decide. The doctor is making a post-mortem. Certain things suggest that it may not have been an accident at all."

"Really!" He blew out his cheeks. "You don't mean—suicide?"

"Not suicide, Sir Adrian. Possibly murder."

"My God! But that's ridiculous. Somebody murder Richard! I don't believe it. You're bungling things, young man."

"Possibly," I said. "But I can find no satisfactory explanation why Mr. Winter should return here to a house he hadn't occupied for three months, start packing a suitcase, and then break off in the middle of that and take a cold bath."

Sir Adrian thought about this. Finally he walked farther along the hall and beckoned me aside.

"Let's go into the drawing-room," he said.

The place was empty. Mrs. Winter must have gone into some other part of the house.

Sir Adrian sat down by the desk and dropped his umbrella and hat beside him. "Damn cold in here," he said, buttoning up his overcoat. "Isn't there a gas fire or anything?"

I shook my head. "Gas has been disconnected."

"This room is bad enough when it's warm. Without any heat it reminds me of a museum. The stuff is worth a fortune, too . . . Well now, inspector——"

"Sergeant," I corrected.

"Sergeant," he said. "I feel you should know a little more about the family. I think you'd realise then that Richard was crazy. And when people are crazy they do the most alarming things. The point is that I do not want any publicity or scandal to arise from this affair. All my life I've been haunted by Richard's intolerable escapades. He had no

moral sense, no sense of decency, nothing. You probably knew him as a great actor. To me he's been a thorn in the flesh for more years than I care to remember.

"We grew up together and I don't think we ever agreed. When our father died the estate was left equally to the two of us. I went into business and gradually I carved out a position for myself. Richard went on the stage. By the time he was thirty he had blown every penny of his share in the estate. He lived wildly. He tied himself to a succession of women. He drank like a fish. I was on tenterhooks, wondering what the devil he would get up to next.

"By thirty-five he was an admitted success on the stage. He married an excellent wife and I thought that he would settle down at last. Not a bit of it. He spent money faster than ever and I was compelled to make him an allowance. He was flagrantly unfaithful to his wife many times, but she stuck to him. She went on sticking to him until the situation was impossible. Then she left him. She is now in America.

"He met the present Mrs. Winter and married her and I thought for a time that she would manage to look after him. But no. On several occasions he backed the most uncommercial plays and I was forced to cover him and pay up. He never showed any signs of gratitude. In fact, it was exactly the opposite."

Sir Adrian paused and a pained expression came into his face.

"Four years ago he dug up an old will of our father's in which he was entitled to two-thirds of the estate. He employed some shady lawyers in America and started proceedings against me. A year passed and the case was still going on. Then Richard's drinking bouts grew worse and worse and he was forced to leave the stage. For the last three years he had been subjected to a cure which appeared to be successful. Mrs. Winter spent her life looking after him. I don't know how she stood it. But I do know that he altered under her treatment. You might almost say he reformed.

Life has taught me to be a little dubious of people who do as they please and when I heard that Richard was returning to the stage I feared the worst. I think you will admit that my fears have been justified. It is obvious from the facts that were presented to me that he was hopelessly drunk and that his condition caused him to do what he did and brought about his death. Unless you have seen him in one of his bouts you can

have no conception of the mad things of which he was capable."

Sir Adrian shrugged his shoulders and sat back.

"I don't want to influence your decision at all, but I could bring as many witnesses as you think necessary to prove my point."

He obviously desired to have done with the whole business. Richard Winter was dead and he wanted to bury him as fast as possible. With the weight of Sir Adrian's name a coroner's jury would probably record a verdict of accidental death. And there would be no more said about it.

That was the easy way out. But I didn't like it. I had the feeling that I was being hustled into something, that I was being shown merely one side of the picture. Sir Adrian's method was subtler than Mrs. Winter's, but they both possessed the same air of camouflage. What were they hiding?

"Earlier this morning I might have accepted that solution, Sir Adrian," I said. "But since I was set on in the garden there, the situation has altered."

"Just so." Sir Adrian pursed his lips. He hated meeting opposition. "I should imagine it was probably some tramp."

"I don't think that. It was someone who was pretty strong and who was wearing a bowler hat. Not a very full description, but it's all I have to go on."

"A bowler hat, eh?"

Was there a slight change in his voice?

"Lots of people wear bowler hats," he said, with a laugh.

"Tell me, Sir Adrian, what happened to the law-suit?"

"Law-suit?"

"The one in America."

"Oh, that. Well, Richard won. I came to an agreement to avoid any further expense: The thing threatened to go on for ever. Six months ago I paid Richard fifty thousand pounds."

So Richard had won. Well, well . . .

"When did you last see Mr. Winter, Sir Adrian?"

"Must have been last Tuesday. Yes, it was. He came into my office for a moment to ask me about some business. He seemed perfectly normal then. Matter of fact, I was struck by his quiet and sober manner."

"Had he been drunk in the last three years—to your knowledge?"

"No. That was the extraordinary part of it. It really looked like a complete cure. He gave up all his Bohemian ways and settled down peacefully."

I nodded. "And can you offer any reason why he should have been drunk last Friday when he came to the rehearsal?"

"The theatre, of course. The theatre always affected him that way. It stirred up the worst in him."

I wasn't willing to accept the explanation, but neither did I want to argue with Sir Adrian at this stage.

As I said nothing he glanced at his watch.

"Must be going," he said. "I have an important conference. If there is anything else——"

"Not at the moment," I replied. "I'll let you know of any developments."

"I think you will find it was just an accident," he said, retrieving his hat and umbrella. He strode out of the room.

From the window I watched his dignified passage down to the path to his car, a smooth, calculated exit that would have done justice to a feudal prince.

I had talked now for several hours about Richard Winter and yet every minute I seemed to be travelling further away from him. I saw him only through a fog. If I wanted to play safe I'd fall in with Sir Adrian's suggestion that it was all an accident. There were cases when you did that sort of thing, when you rigged the evidence to fit the verdict. But the personality of the actor intrigued and eluded me. There were a million things I wanted to know.

Perhaps it was worth the risk. After all, Richard had won his lawsuit, hadn't he?

Elliot and I went through the house from top to bottom. We found very little. Some of the rooms had been closed for a long time and were heavy with dust. Some contained theatrical relics in glass cases; I noticed a script of Kean's and a slipper belonging to the great Bernhardt. You would have thought they were the sort of things Winter would want to see, things of which he was proud. Yet they were together on the dirty boards of an unfurnished room. Here we went we discovered that Mrs. Winter had told us. She was filling suitcases with various things and books. She excused herself by saying that she had to go. I was annoyed but I could do nothing. Feeling she was trying to step down the death duties

on the house as much as possible. Yet if Winter had fifty thousand pounds was that necessary?

We came back to Winter's bedroom. All the objects taken from the pockets of the suit which had hung in the bathroom were lying on the bed. Various business letters, some loose change, a pencil, a fountain-pen. I was going to toss them aside when I noticed two begrimed envelopes addressed to "Richard Winter, Esq., Regent Theatre." I opened them. In each was a sheet torn from a copy of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. And on the top of the sheets was the cryptic word: "Remember?"

Elliot scratched his head.

"What do you make of that?"

I recalled that Lewis had mentioned Winter receiving two notes during rehearsals of the play. These were obviously the ones.

"Better test them for prints," I said. "Though what anyone would want to send him a couple of pages of Shakespeare for I don't know."

"It's all screwy," said Elliot. "Now, if only we had something really messy. A sex murder, for instance. You know where you are with things like that."

"You have a one-track mind," I said. "People don't spend their entire lives jumping in and out of bed with blondes."

"Be better if they did," he said. "Be more peace in the world."

"You ought to write a book about it," I suggested. "Salvation Through Sex."

He grunted and tried to think up something caustic in the way of a reply. At the same moment there was a clash of voices downstairs. Janet Winter had arrived and she and Mrs. Winter must have met in the hall. The sparks were flying in no mean manner.

Mrs. Winter was accusing Janet of being responsible for Winter's death. "You drove him to it," she was shouting. "You and that awful play! He was perfectly all right until you tricked him into this mad scheme. You knew it would upset him, but you didn't care! You thought only of you and that young man!"

Janet's feathers were ruffled by this. Her voice was higher pitch than normal. She violently refuted Winter's accusations. "It was you who got on his

she snapped. "You irritated him more than any one of us. You did all you could to thwart him. You wanted to keep him in a glass case and show him off as though he was a museum and you were the curator."

"I understood his genius!" said Mrs. Winter hysterically.

"If he had genius you certainly didn't understand it. He loathed the way you tried to manage his life!"

"It's not true!" sobbed Mrs. Winter. "It's not true! How dare you say such a thing!"

It was time I intervened. I walked to the stairs.

"Women," said Elliot, "are the devil. You know, I think the Turks have got something with that harem idea."

When I reached the hall, Mrs. Winter was wiping tears from her eyes and Janet's face was very white. Behind them a constable was looking very bored and cynical.

Mrs. Winter pulled herself together when she saw me.

"May I leave now?" she asked. "I would like to get back to my flat."

"Certainly, Mrs. Winter," I said. "You will stay in London for the next few days?"

She nodded and I beckoned to the constable who helped her out with the suitcases.

Janet slumped down on the settle in the hall. She waited for Mrs. Winter to go, then she turned to me. I was thinking that I would be crazy by now if I lived with that grandfather clock. It had a sardonic tick, a nasty superior tick that suggested that all humanity was a little feeble.

"How did it happen?" said Janet.

I told her.

"I can't begin to believe it yet," she murmured when I had finished.

I knew that she and her father had lost no love on each other, but somehow I was convinced that she exhibited the first genuine grief I had seen so far.

Janet and I sat in the drawing-room. I was beginning to suffer a reaction from my escapade in the pond and I borrowed Elliot's coat to keep warm. He took a very poor view of this, but I put him outside to deal with the reporters who were hanging round hoping for a story.

Janet's sallow face matched the faded elegance of the room. Even her tweed suit did not war too heavily with the tapestry and the gilt and the metal inlay. She looked very beautiful

sitting there under the window. Not the beauty of regular features, but a strange fascination produced by the high cheek bones and the widely set eyes. You'd have thought that Winter with his artistic appreciation would have been proud of her. Yet they had never exchanged half a dozen words without quarrelling.

"Now, there are one or two things you must tell me," I said.

She nodded.

"First—do you believe that your father, in a drunken bout, could have met his death by accident?"

"It's difficult to believe it. And yet——"

"And yet what?"

"It couldn't have happened any other way, could it?"

"He might have committed suicide," I said.

"I don't think so. He was very vain and self-satisfied, you know."

"Or someone might have killed him."

She stared at me. Evidently the idea had not occurred to her before. "Do you really think that?"

"Perhaps," I said. "I'm merely working on every hypothesis. The trouble is that I know so little about him. What kind of man, was he?"

"He wasn't just one man," she said. "He was a whole crowd of people, all in one. I've known him stupidly, quixotically generous and I've known him despicably mean. He had a terrible temper and in his worst moods he condemned everything. Yet he could, on occasion, be the most tolerant person on earth."

"Why did you and he never get on?"

"I wouldn't be the dutiful daughter, fawning reverently on his greatness. I refused to take his advice on the theatre. I knew him too well. Perhaps that was the main point. You see, I knew that mother had treated him fairly, that the break-up of their marriage was entirely his fault. He liked to pretend to Christine that mother never understood him, that she was a sort of ogre who had haunted his existence. I knew this wasn't true and my presence about the house embarrassed him. He didn't realise that by marrying Christine he had walked straight into a trap."

"What sort of trap?" I asked.

"Christine fell in love with Richard Winter, the great actor. She fancied herself as the guardian of genius. She

created this awful room and she imagined that father would hold intellectual parties in it. She wanted him to live in the way she imagined a great actor should live. I honestly believe that she was the cause of his drinking getting beyond bounds. You see, for as long as I can remember he has always drunk heavily. I doubt if he ever went on the stage completely sober. When he finally collapsed it was he who insisted on going into a nursing home."

"He did that?" I said. "What would Christine have done with him then?"

"Brought him back here, of course. Driven him mad with her tender care. When he came out of the nursing home he looked better than he'd looked for years. Then came the war and the theatre closed down for a time. He was forced to stay here with Christine. The last two years must have been hell for him. She hedged him round so that he couldn't move. She invited all manner of famous people to meet him, and he was horribly bored. He didn't like famous people. Sometimes I doubt if he even liked the theatre very much."

"What did he like?"

She shrugged her shoulders.

"I can't tell you," she said. "I wish I knew."

"Did he succeed in escaping from Christine at all in the last two years?"

"Not that I know of. But then, I didn't see a great deal of him. Certainly he seemed completely cured when he started this show." She paused and then continued. "The few times I came here he appeared to be absolutely cowed by Christine's masterful personality."

"This last bout may have been the first for two years then?"

"Yes . . . easily. But even then I don't understand why he should have waited until just before the opening of the show."

"Perhaps he received a shock of some kind," I said. "A shock that caused him to disappear on Friday. Have you any idea what that might be?"

She shook her head.

"I only know I was worried. I had a feeling that something was wrong. A premonition, if you like. I started looking for him the same evening. I was desperately anxious that Lewis' play shouldn't flop."

"But you didn't find him?"

"No."

"Did you come here?"

"Yes."

She got up from the chair and started to pace the room.

Outside it was a dismal, overcast day. A leaden blanket of cloud hung over the rooftops. The pond in the centre of the lawn was ruffled by the slight breeze, the water reflecting the grey coldness of the sky.

"You finally ran him to earth here on Sunday?" I queried.

"Yes. Sunday."

"What did he say?"

"He was in a temper, said he couldn't get away from people anywhere and what the blazes did I want. I told him we were anxious about the play. He replied that he had changed his mind and wasn't going to act in it. That made me mad and I told him exactly what I thought. I said that the least he could do was to write to his bank and fix the financial side. He promised to do that and I left him. He offered no explanation of his behaviour at all and I was far too angry to ask him."

"Was he drunk?"

"No . . . Yesterday morning—Monday—Lewis got a letter saying that the bank had been instructed to handle everything. That put us in right with the theatre managers. When we showed them the letter we had to pretend that father was ill, but that we hoped he would be well enough to appear in the evening. Naturally they wanted to postpone the first night but Lewis wouldn't hear of it."

"About what time did you see your father on Sunday morning?"

"It must have been around ten o'clock."

"What was he doing here?"

"I don't know. I met him in the hall."

"And you can't suggest any reason why he should have suddenly given up the play?"

"No. It's quite a mystery."

I produced the two envelopes which had been found in the pocket of Winter's suit. "You mentioned last night that he received two notes during rehearsals at the theatre. Would these be the ones?" I handed her the envelopes.

She took out the contents. "Two pages of *Macbeth*!" she said, surprise lighting her face.

"On each of them there's the word 'remember' written. Can you suggest what it means or who might have written it?"

She scrutinised the pages.

"No. I'm afraid not. Of course, *Macbeth* is a traditionally unlucky play. Some people are terribly superstitious about it. Father's only acted in it once to my knowledge, and that was many years ago."

She was beginning to get restive. She glanced at her watch. "I don't want to seem impatient," she said, "but I have a matinee to-day."

"I won't keep you more than a couple of minutes," I told her. "Early this morning we had an intruder who nearly finished me in the pond. A short man who wore a bowler hat. Now that's a very thin description, but does it ring a bell at all?"

"No. Unless it was my uncle—Sir Adrian," she said, with her eyes twinkling.

I smiled. "It definitely wasn't Sir Adrian. . . . Well, that's all, thanks, Miss Winter. If you can think of anything else that's likely to help I'd be glad if you'd let me know." I got up and walked to the door with her. "By the way, how were the notices?"

"They were wonderful," she said.

"So it's a big success, eh?"

"It's almost bound to be—unless——"

"Unless what?"

"I was thinking that perhaps father's death might affect things."

"You need have no fear about that. We shall keep very quiet about it."

We stood by the door. "I suppose you think me callous to worry about a play at a moment like this?"

"No," I said. "There's too much time wasted on grief in this world as it is. Good-bye, Miss Winter. When I want you again I'll let you know."

Elliot opened the front door for her and his eyes followed the silk-clad legs down the steps.

"That," he said, "is what I call something. Pity she's an actress."

"You don't like actresses?" I said.

"It's nothing personal. But when they're not acting they're rehearsing and when they're not rehearsing they're learning their parts and when they're not doing any of these

things they're going round the agents. What chance has love under conditions like that?"

"They find time for it."

"Maybe. But I like my passion leisurely." He smiled that wicked smile of his. "Which reminds me that I haven't yet told you the story of the sultan and his eunuchs."

"Later on," I said. "Later on."

Another half an hour and I decided to go home. I sent Elliot off to check up on the various points we had discovered. Not that they amounted to very much, but we had to start somewhere.

Then I got a cab and on the way back I tried to think things over. The taxi-driver gave a doubtful look at the spectacle of a bedraggled specimen in a dressing-gown and overcoat. I passed it off as though it was quite natural, but he kept turning round and looking at me through the connecting glass, evidently expecting me to disappear or change into a pumpkin at any moment.

Richard Winter had died in his bath. According to the doctor's estimate he had been dead for at least three days. According to Janet he had been alive at ten o'clock on Sunday. You could take your pick.

And Winter himself?

He was steadily developing into an enigma. Some people said an actor was every part he played. It seemed to apply to Winter all right. Yet somewhere there must be a key to his character, a clue that when I found it, it would tell me how and why he had died.

I glanced at the books of theatre programmes and press notices that I had taken away with me. They told a story of unending triumph, of a trail blazed across the world. Winter, the magnificent. And through those programmes you got a picture of him coming down to the footlights every night, maybe a little drunk, but always deafened by the shattering applause. Millions of hands clapping, millions of ordinary men and women whose emotions had been wrung by his enormous power. Could he have been indifferent to all that? Janet seemed to think so and yet, on the surface, it appeared so illogical.

When I got out of the cab the driver noticed that I was carrying my suit. This was the last straw. He decided then that I was screwy.

As I paid him the fare I said: "I suppose you wonder why I'm doing this?"

"No, mister," he replied. "No, I don't wonder at all. Often carry my suits myself. It saves coupons."

I had no choice but to beat a dignified retreat.

It didn't end there, though. Anna had something to say about it.

"Whatever have you been doing?" she said.

"Fishing for newts," I told her.

She examined the suit. "Why, it's all wet."

"I was nearly drowned in a pond in Hampstead," I said stiffly.

"But, darling, did you have to do it in your good suit?"

"Next time I'll remember to use overalls," I said. "But I might add that I am now wearing a dressing-gown belonging to the illustrious Richard Winter. If you look carefully you will find traces of Leichner No. 9 on the collar."

She didn't get it, of course. She stared at me.

"What have you been doing with Richard Winter? I suppose you didn't think to get his autograph?"

"That would have been difficult, considering he was dead."

"Dead!"

"Yes." There was nothing for it but to tell her everything. She listened intently, breaking off every now and then to go and examine something in the oven.

"Do you think it was an accident?" she asked.

I said I was sure it wasn't. "Somebody deliberately bumped him off."

"Like Smith," she murmured. "The Brides in the Bath."

"You could hardly call Winter a bride. Not even when he was wearing his corsets and his wig."

"Darling, I think you're positively callous."

"Where's John?" I said.

"Out with Miss Pain. She had a day off."

"That woman must like children."

"I think she's repressed, poor dear." Anna made a final dash into the kitchen. There was a lot of clatter as she manhandled plates and things. Then she emerged from a cloud of steam and said that lunch was ready.

We sat down at the table and I stared at an odd-looking concoction in a pie-dish. It smelt pretty peculiar, too.

"What the devil is it?" I asked.

"I don't really know, darling. I got the recipe from one of Lord Woolton's advertisements."

We started eating and I have never eaten anything before which tasted so much like nothing at all.

"Perhaps I didn't cook it long enough," Anna suggested tentatively.

"It's cooked all right But what is it?"

"I don't know, darling. I've lost the paper in which it was advertised."

"I think I'll ring up Claridges and get him here to try some," I said.

"Get who?"

"Woolton. He might know what it's meant to be."

"It was something that saved shipping space. I'm sure of that. . . . It's not bad, really." She poised some on her fork. "You want to put some salt on it."

I tried salt and went on eating. The only result was that I finished up with an alarming thirst. Of course, there wasn't any beer, so I had to drink water.

Anna was very crestfallen.

"Darling, I felt sure it would be all right."

I kissed her. "You never want to believe what you read in the papers," I said.

There was a ring on the door-bell.

"That'll be Miss Pain with John," said Anna.

But it wasn't. It was Elliot. He hurried into the room, smiled at Anna, and sat down opposite me.

"Haven't broken in on your lunch, have I, sarge?"

I glanced at Anna and she glanced at me. We both smiled. She explained to Elliot about the meal and he shook his head sadly.

"I know how it is," he said. "I had canteen sausages myself. I have a suspicion that the Commissioner makes them now. Fills them with old charge sheets." He shook his head again. "Bad thing. Plays hell with your impulses. I'm only half the man I was."

Anna laughed. Like most women she had a weak spot for Elliot. She made some tea and produced a packet of Cuban cigarettes that had been given her. Elliot was the only man we knew who was tough enough to smoke them. I suspected that one of his ancestors was a bull-fighter.

"Listen, sarge," he said, sipping his tea and blowing out clouds of poisonous smoke. "We have a line at last. I went

round to Winter's bank and discovered that they have received no instructions at all about the financial side of that play. I thought this was strange so I tottered along to the Regent Theatre and got hold of that letter which Winter wrote to Lewis Mason. I took it to the bank manager. Now, this bank manager is a shrewd sort of bird. He had a dekkko at the letter. Then he showed it to his head man and they both agreed that, in their opinion, the letter hadn't been written by Winter at all. This was a gentle way of suggesting that it was a forgery."

"You've got something there," I said. "Did you enquire about a will?"

"Yes. It was lodged at the bank. The manager hummed and hawed a bit before he told me. Strictly off the record he said that the sole legatee is Janet Winter and that the estate runs into several thousands."

This set me thinking. Why had Winter left his money to a daughter he disliked intensely? Why? It didn't add up at all. It did account for Christine's attitude, of course. If she wasn't going to get a penny, it was natural she should fill her suitcases with whatever valuables she could scrape together.

I was preparing to go out with Elliot and try to get to the bottom of this letter business when the door-bell rang again.

Anna answered it. She came back presently.

"Somebody called Stuart Jennings. Says he's a journalist."

"Tell him I'm out."

"Too late. He heard your voice."

"Damn," I said.

Stuart Jennings was one of those very unsuccessful journalists who hang on to the outside of the profession. I knew him moderately well because he had helped me in a club case about six months ago. An odd sort of creature who never settled down anywhere. Seemed to have been everything in his time from a waiter to a film script writer. Whenever he had money he started a weekly paper of some kind and lost it all.

He didn't wait for Anna to go back to the door. He came striding into the lounge, wearing a raffish tweed suit and badly wanting a haircut. He had ink-black hair which flopped over his forehead and piercing brown eyes.

"Hello, Warren," he said. "Just heard that Winter's been done in."

I stared at him.

"Then you've heard more than I have."

"It was obviously murder. A man like Winter wouldn't commit suicide."

"Look," I said. "I can't give you any information. My hands are tied. It's no go, Stuart."

Stuart laughed. "I bet I know who's been tying your hands. The mighty Sir Adrian. God, how Winter hated that man."

"You're wasting your time, Stuart. I can't tell you anything."

"My dear chap, I don't want you to tell me anything. Not yet. It's I who can tell you something."

This set me back a bit. "What can you tell me?"

"Do you know where Winter was last Friday night?"

"No," I said.

"I do." Stuart smiled. "I know a lot of other things. I probably know more about Winter than you do."

"Then it's your duty to tell me."

Stuart sat down. "Only on a reciprocative basis, my dear chap."

"You must realise I can't make any bargains like that."

"I don't want any bargains. I just want to be the first in at the kill. You see, I'm paid by the line these days. That's what I've come down to."

I thought it over.

"All right," I said. "But you won't get any special privileges. Nothing. You understand?"

"Perfectly." He fumbled in his pocket and produced a half-smoked cigarette. He lit it casually. "On Friday night Winter was in a pub in the East End called 'The Bells'."

"Why was he there?"

"That's something you'll have to find out for yourself," he said, smiling enigmatically. "You're the detective. I don't see why I should do all the work."



CHAPTER FOUR

STUART'S superior manner annoyed me. He was so damned sure of himself. Still, I couldn't very well turn him down. I needed all the help I could get.

"What was he doing at this pub?"

"Drinking."

"I could guess that. How do you know he was there?"

"Because I was there myself. . . . He was drowned in a bath, wasn't he?"

I nodded.

"Funny that," went on Stuart. "He was always afraid of water. I travelled to America once on the same boat as he did. It was all they could do to dissuade him from wearing his life-belt the whole time. He was a coward where the sea was concerned. I've often thought he was scared of life, too."

"You knew him?" I asked.

"Not to speak to. Good Lord, Winter would never speak to a penniless journalist. Let's say that I observed him. I don't expect you remember, but just before the war I started a theatrical monthly. That brought me into contact with a lot of stage people. There are enough stories about Winter to fill a book . . . In fact, that's an idea. I wonder if anybody's writing his biography?"

I looked at Elliot, who was hiding behind a cloud of Cuban smoke. You couldn't tell what he thought of the sudden advent of Stuart Jennings. Anna had hastily got another cup of tea and she gave it to the journalist.

"Thanks awfully, Mrs. Warren. . . . No sugar, thanks. I've managed to wean myself off it since the war. Had to retrench all round, in fact. It hasn't brought me fame and fortune like it has some people."

I felt that it was a sore point with him that many of his friends were now war correspondents in various parts of the world, whereas he had been relegated to that scrap-heap of hack journalism from which few return. The truth was—he was unreliable. He could be brilliant, but you couldn't depend on him. One newspaper had sent him to Sweden just before the war. For a time he had secured front page despatches. Then suddenly he had gone haywire, upset the government,

and got himself into trouble. He arrived back in London and drank himself under the table in various Fleet Street pubs.

"If you want a biography of Winter you'll have to tackle Mrs. Christine Winter," I said.

"Oh, Christine." He laughed. "That was a joke the way she tried to turn the disreputable Richard into a famous figure of society. I happen to know when he was recuperating from his alcoholic collapse she used to give afternoon teas. One day she invited a couple of highbrow novelists. Richard was violently rude and threw a cream bun at each of them. It must have been wonderful. Even the spectacle of him toying with a cup of China tea would have been enough."

"Do you think he was ever in love with her?" I said.

"Not on your life. Richard Winter never loved anybody but himself. I doubt if he ever had a real emotion. But Christine seemed to be able to control him just a little. She pestered him so much that he found it easier sometimes to give way to her."

I saw that I would have to let Stuart in on the evidence we possessed. Only like that could he be of use to me. It meant breaking regulations, but what would you do?

I recounted what had happened so far. Stuart listened carefully, while Elliot accepted another cigarette from Anna.

"Fancy Christine telling you that nonsense about Winter and air raids," said Stuart when I had finished.

"Why?"

"There's not a word of truth in it. That's the odd thing. Winter who was scared of practically everything else, who would run a mile rather than face a mouse, was literally almost unafraid of bombs. That sounds ridiculous, doesn't it? But there was something in him that exulted in the terrific destruction. Sensitive my foot! That was just part of the tailor-made character she handed out to publicity hunters. Why, on the night that bomb fell opposite his house he was roaring drunk. I know that because a friend of mine was a warden in that area. One of the people killed by the bomb was that famous song-writer fellow—Hansack. My friend found Winter wandering in the road shouting his head off, excited as a child. When he heard that Hansack was dead he said: 'Thank God for that. He wrote bloody awful music.'"

I laughed.

"Is that true?"

"Honest. Christine may have kidded herself that he

didn't drink during those two years, but I know different. He just grew more cunning. He drank secretly and since it took a hell of a lot to make him really tight he got away with the impression that he was completely on the wagon. There was even a story that he bribed the attendants in the inebriates' home and that one night they all had a party. When the doctor-in-charge arrived on the scene he found all the attendants drunk and Winter strutting up and down in a curtain reciting Hamlet."

"Can you throw any light on those two pages of *Macbeth* that were sent to him in envelopes?"

"Not at the moment. But I might think of something."

There was a pause and then Anna said:

"It seems a pity he should have to be killed like that. He was such a marvellous actor."

"He was a ham," replied Stuart. "Not an actor."

Anna shook her head. "I won't give you that, Mr. Jennings. When I saw him as Hamlet he was magnificent."

"Broad as hell, though; and he took good care that he hadn't much competition. His companies were made up of very mediocre players."

"Perhaps," she said. "But I still think he was magnificent. It may just be me. I think modern acting is too restrained in most cases anyway."

"He certainly had a reputation," said Stuart. "And that is really all that matters." He set his cup and saucer on the floor. "And he never did anything to deserve it. He was an unpleasant character. Mean, grasping, deceitful, callous and despicable." His voice held all the venom of the small man gnawing at the carcase of the great.

"And yet he gave pleasure to millions," said Anna.

Elliot grunted and broke his long silence.

"Most of us are pretty mean anyhow," he said. "I know I am."

"That's the point," I said. "All those things you called Winter could apply to most major artists. Perhaps the side they show the world is the least important of the lot."

As I loosed off this trite remark I began to see one step further into the maze that was Richard Winter. Neither his life nor his death could be judged by ordinary standards. Once you accepted that then you were well on the road to discovering the manner of his dying.

I decided that I must go to "The Bells" at once and

SHE FELL AMONG ACTORS

Stuart offered to come with me. I told Elliot to see if he could pin down anything about the letter.

"Talk to Janet Winter," I said. "I think she knows a lot more than she's admitted."

Elliot nodded.

"I had an idea about the hat, too, sarge," he said. "I noticed that the brim in front is worn and covered with grease. Makes quite a smooth surface. I thought we might have it tested for prints and sent along to Records for a check-up."

"Yes," I said. "It's worth trying. Tell Records to speed it up. They usually take a couple of weeks to make up their minds."

"Righto, sarge."

He said good-bye to Anna and departed.

"That man positively oozes sex appeal," she said, when he had gone.

Stuart laughed.

"What is sex appeal, Mrs. Warren?"

"I don't think anybody knows," I said. "Not even Havelock Ellis."

It took us half an hour in a taxi to reach "The Bells." It was situated on the corner of a shabby street facing a big building which Stuart told me was a disused theatre.

"The Palace," he said, "was once a very famous place. Winter scored his first big success there. But it has gradually gone from bad to worse. They had vaudeville for a time and I think they even tried to make it into a cinema, but they couldn't get the L.C.C. to grant a licence. Something to do with the fire regulations."

The sides of the theatre were now the medium for political messages in chalk, interspersed with official bills urging people to save more. Ragged children were playing with a muddy tennis ball in the street. Large over-bosomed, blowsy women stood on doorsteps and mangey cats sniffed in the gutters. On the spot where a bomb had demolished three of the grim little houses an emergency water tank had been built. Firemen were busy filling it with a trailer pump.

"The Bells" had a tiled façade and drab, dirty windows which were plastered with notices extolling the determination of the publican to keep open and be damned to the bombs. There were several entrances and at one of them a couple of

sailors were waiting for opening time, whiling away the minutes by whistling at three girls who were standing at a bus stop.

Farther along the street was a pawnbroker's shop bearing a vulgar gilt sign, and next to it a horse butcher's with a small queue of tired women waiting to be served.

We banged on the door of the private bar and presently someone opened it.

"'Nother half-hour yet. Sorry, gents." A man stood in the doorway, one heavy fist on the door. He was very fat and he had a large sack of flesh under his chin like the wattle of a turkey-cock. His eyes were bloodshot and only a few sparse grey hairs adorned his greasy head. His feet were encased in worn leather slippers and a thick belt helped to prop up his sagging belly.

He was about to close the door again when he saw Stuart.

"Why, Mr. Jennings. Didn't notice it was you. Anything I can do?"

"This is Detective-sergeant Warren. He wants to ask you a few questions, Ben."

Ben Thomas, for that was his name, flicked his bloodshot eyes at me.

"I don't allow no betting and no gamin'," he said, belligerently. "I keep a clean house. There ain't nothin' you can have me for."

"I don't want to have you," I said, with a smile.

"Wot's it abaht then?"

"Dickie Winter," said Stuart.

"What's 'appened to him?"

"He's dead," I replied.

"Dead! Not Dickie Winter?" He drew in his breath sharply, making a sound like a soda siphon.

"I'm afraid so," said Stuart.

"Accident, was it?"

"We don't know," I said.

"Caw . . . When did he die?" He seemed almost incapable of taking in the news.

"If you'll let us come in," I said, "we can talk about it."

He stepped quickly aside and led us to a marble-topped table that was covered with grime and beer stains. There was sawdust on the floor of the bar into which cigarette butts had been ground. The fly-blown shelves at the back of the counter were flanked with glass that was chipped and blurred. It was a depressing sight.

SHE FELL AMONG ACTORS

He was genuinely upset when he heard of Winter's fate. His eyes filled with tears and he blew his nose into a capacious handkerchief that hadn't been washed for a long time. "Was it an accident?" he managed to ask eventually.

"It may have been," I said. "We don't know. We're just trying to trace where he'd been since Friday morning. Stuart here tells me that he was in this pub on Friday night."

"Well . . . since he's passed over I suppose there ain't no 'arm in me admitting that he was. Yer see, he didn't want everybody to know he come here. Had a family and a wife that was hoity-toity."

"Did he come often?"

"Every few weeks in the last year or so. And before that when he was away on his tours he'd always send me postcards of the places where he was. And when he come back to England he used to say this was the first stop he made. He was a good sort and no mistake. What an actor, too. Blimey, there ain't nobody to touch him nowadays. These tuppenny ha'penny upstarts don't know what acting is. Why, I seen Dickie Winter when 'e had twenty curtain calls, when they wore their 'ands out clapping for him. Sometimes he'd fool 'em. He wouldn't appear till he'd taken off his make-up. That meant they had to clap solid for over ten minutes. 'Ow many actors could do that now? Not one of 'em!"

"Have you known him long?" I asked.

"Bless me soul, yes. I knew him right from the start. I was stage-doorkeeper over there at the Palace when he had his first big success. He wasn't half a lad in them days. Always 'avin' a joke, he was. Took nothing seriously. Not even his actin'. But then he didn't 'ave to take that seriously. He couldn't help being good. He was a born actor."

"And you say that during the last two years he has been here every few weeks?"

"That's right."

"Just for an evening at a time?"

Ben laughed. It was a loud laugh, but somehow there was a nostalgic sadness in it. "No, bless yer, no. When he come he'd stay for two or three days. He'd doss down in one of the rooms upstairs and we'd have a good old blind-up. He weren't particular, not Dickie Winter. No side with him, nothing. His manner never altered even when he was cock of the walk. We'd yarn about old times. I used to enjoy it. Always have had me heart in the profession. . . ." He

broke off and gazed dejectedly round the bar, as though oppressed by the thought that there would be no more blind-ups with Dickie Winter. "And to think he's gorn. Ah well, we all has to go, I suppose. But they might have spared him a bit longer, so they might."

I produced a packet of cigarettes and offered them to the other two. As I struck a match my eyes fixed on the squalid setting. The cracked porcelain beer handles, the faded cigarette advertisements, the collecting box on the side of the counter labelled "For Merchant Seamen," the dart board with its pitted surface and the small blackboard beside it that was almost white from continual applications of chalk.

Through the top half of the window you could just see the derelict Palace Theatre. I thought of it in the old days with its lights blazing and its seats full, and of a younger, gayer Richard Winter, debonair and good-looking, who haunted its backstage corridors. A Winter hurtling to success. A man doomed to hit the high spots. And down there in the box behind the time clock, a younger Ben, a man who laughed easily and who was filled with hero-worship for the actor.

And now the theatre was empty, the lights had gone out and the street was a backwater of broken hopes. Under the shadow of it an older Winter had sat and drank and talked with this man who had once guarded the stage-door. Was it just as an escape from Christine, from the dreadful personality she sought to thrust on him? Or was it more than that?

"Yerce," said Ben, puffing at his cigarette. "He's a good friend gorn and no mistake. Never forgot me, he didn't. Some of 'em don't want to know yer when they gets to be stars. Course, I 'as a few of 'em in, but not many. Not like the old days. . . ."

"Yer see, Dickie Winter helped to set me up in this pub. He knew I wanted it and he just come along one day and handed me a cheque. I didn't want to take it, but he says if I don't have it then it'd go in taxes or on booze. We had a smart turn-out and a grand opening. People knew how to drink in them days. The old Palace was doing roaring business too. This became a rendezvous for professionals. They'd slip in between the acts with their make-up on and they was always up to some game or another. . . ."

"Then the straight stuff left and they started to make a music hall of it. Weren't the same. Nice lot of lads but not like the legitimate. Got a different sort of crowd, too.

down hill, if you asks me. Still, that's how it is with anything. People ain't got no taste any more. I tell yer, I'd rather see Dickie Winter in Shakespeare than all them music hall comedians rolled into one. They don't get the applause he got. And when he was famous there'd be queues ten deep at the stage-door. He used to wear his pens out signing autographs.

"So he did sign autographs?" I asked.

"Only for kids. Funny, he'd do anything for kids. Always giving 'em money or buying sweets and tossing 'em round. Lot of flashy skirts, too, there'd be waiting for him. But he never took no notice of 'em. Just ignore 'em he would. You had to laugh. Pretty smashin' bits they were as a rule. But ole Dickie wouldn't have any truck with 'em. 'I'd rather have a glass of beer and a good cigar,' he'd say with a smile. He was a caution all right.

"He did a lot for me, yer know. When I was took bad with gallstone he paid for me operation. Had a private ward in the hospital and he come an' see me every day. 'Course, I was really ill. Might have died, but Dickie got a specialist from Harley Street to do the operation. I still got the stones they took out of me even now. Yerce, I owe a lot to Dickie and no mistake. He's a good friend gorn. . . ."

Here was another voice telling another story. At last a glimpse of Winter as a human figure. Generous, kind, good-natured. Or was it merely a further manifestation of his absurd vanity?

"Tell me?" I said. "What about his drinking?"

"Well, he drank a lot, o' course. But then so do most of 'em. That wife of his used to get on his nerves."

"The second Mrs. Winter?"

"That's right. Yerce, he used to call her a so-and-so cow. Always the way with actors. Never ought ter get married, yer know. There ain't nothing lasting about the stage, and marriage, ter my mind, wants a steady sort of handling."

"How did he get drunk?" I asked. "I mean—people act differently when they're loaded with alcohol."

"Funny you should mention that." Ben rubbed his mouth with the back of his hand. Strands of cigarette tobacco clung to his thick purple lips. "He could put away an awful lot without it affecting 'im. Then suddenly he'd go out like a light. He'd be paralytic in a second and he wouldn't

come round for a couple of hours. There was never any in-between with him. Most folk gets so they don't know what they're doing. Makes fools of themselves, doing daft things because they're canned. But Dickie acted quite normal until he went out and then he was just insensible, dead to the world. Like a sack of potatoes. Often I've carried him up those stairs."

"Now," I said. "What happened on Friday night?"

"Let me see." Ben rasped his chin. "He come here about seven o'clock, I should say. He seemed in 'igh spirits and he insisted on buying everyone a drink all round. I asked him what had happened, but he wouldn't tell me."

"Have you any idea what it was?"

"Naw, All I know is that he was like he used to be twenty years ago. Full of jokes. Didn't seem to have a care in the world. He went on drinking till about ten."

"Was he drunk?"

Ben shook his head. "Just normal. At ten he said something about having to go back to his old house."

"The one at Hampstead?"

"That's right. Don't know what it is about. But I didn't take particular notice. We was pretty full up here. Well . . . then he left. Doris got 'im a cab outside."

"Doris?" I queried.

"My niece. Sort of orphan. She's been with me since she was five. She's twenty-six now. 'Elps me in the bar. She wanted ter go on the stage, but she hasn't really any talent for it. I'll go and get her. She's upstairs. I think it's about time I opened up, too." He glanced at a heavy watch which he took from his waistcoat pocket. Then he shambled off through a door at the back.

"Well," said Stuart, who had been sitting silent all this while. "Do you see any light?"

"I don't know," I said. "What do you know about this woman Doris?"

"Not a great deal. She's the dumbest creature I've ever met. Bit of a dark horse, though. Most of the actors who have been in and out of here have seduced her at one time or another. She has a weakness for actors."

"Including Winter?"

"No. She treated him differently. Rather as if he were God. Never called him by his first name—not when I've been in here anyhow."

I heard Ben slipping the bolts on the various entrances and presently there was a creak from a loose board and a girl appeared in the door at the back.

Stuart's words had not prepared me properly for this vision. I'd expected just an average sort of girl. Instead, I saw a blonde of quite extraordinary beauty. Her face was perfectly modelled with exquisite lips and a flawless skin. Her hair hung in a long pageboy bob. She had a tall, well-rounded figure, and heavily lashed grey eyes.

It was when she spoke that she let you down with a bang. Her voice was a common whine and she said words as though she was repeating something she had learnt by heart. She placed an equal stress on every syllable. Almost the intonation of a child who is not quite sure what it is saying.

"Hello, Mr. Jennings," she said. "I've just heard about Mr. Winter. Isn't it terrible? I'm ever so sorry. Was it sudden?"

I could hardly believe it. There was not a vestige of emotion in the voice at all. She might have been talking about the weather, instead of a man's death.

Stuart introduced me. I said I would like to ask her some questions. She came and sat down close to me, exuding cheap perfume. Her red and white dress was flashy, but somehow it added to her beauty. She had long nails from which red varnish was peeling.

"I understand Mr. Winter was in here on Friday evening?" I said.

She inclined her head. "Yes, he was."

"What time did he leave?"

"Oh, around ten o'clock."

"You got him a taxi?"

"Yes, that's right. I had an awful job. We don't get many in this district."

"Did he say anything to you at all?"

"He said good-night."

This was terrible. "I know," I said. "But did he say anything particular. Anything to suggest where he might be going?"

"He did mention that he was going to his house."

"In Hampstead?"

"I think so."

"You just found the cab and he got in and was driven off. Is that right?"

"Yes." Her grey eyes were on me. A steady stare rather like a cat.

"And he wasn't in here after that?"

"No."

"Tell me, have you known him a long time?"

"Oh, yes. Almost as long as I can remember. He and Uncle Ben were great friends. Every now and then they'd have several nights together drinking."

"Did you ever go out with him?"

"Mr. Winter?" She seemed astonished at the suggestion. "Oh, no. Occasionally he brought me a present. Before the war it used to be chocolates. Lately he got me some scent."

"Did you like him?"

"He was nice." She smoothed down her dress. "Ever such fun. Used to liven the place up when he came."

"He talked to you a lot?"

"Oh, yes. Not about anything in particular, though. Usually him and Uncle Ben would talk about the theatre. Things that had happened at the Palace a long time ago. I wasn't interested in that."

"Don't you care for the theatre then?"

"No. Dull, I call it. Much rather go to the pictures. I mean, you see more for your money. I've only been to a theatre twice and I didn't enjoy it at all. Nothing real about it. You knew they was just acting a part like and that spoilt everything."

I looked at Stuart who was deep in thought. Then I turned back to Doris. There were more people in the bar now. People with raucous voices who cracked jokes with each other. Very old jokes that must have been repeated hundreds of times before. But they still brought a laugh and maybe that was all that mattered.

"Surely," I said to Doris, "you've seen Mr. Winter act?"

"No. Uncle Ben often wanted me to go, but I wouldn't. It's just not my cup of tea. Besides, I could see Mr. Winter here. Didn't seem much point in going all the way up West just to see him on a stage."

"But you might have liked the play."

"I doubt it. I think the theatre's soppy myself. Pictures is much better."

I smiled. "Suppose you knew a film star, would you never want to go and see him on the screen?"

"Films is different," she said. "I mean it's not just a stage. It's real life. It happens, doesn't it?"

I wondered what Winter had thought about this. It must have been unique for him to meet someone who had never seen him on a stage and never wanted to. Had he pocketed his hurt vanity in deference to Ben, or had he tried to convert her to the glories of the theatre?

"Tell me, did Mr. Winter ever talk to you about his private affairs?"

"I knew he had a wife he didn't like."

"Did he mention his brother, Sir Adrian?"

Doris hesitated, her hands clasped in her lap.

At that moment, Ben, having satisfied the first demands for liquor, returned to the table.

"Did I hear you speak of Sir Adrian Winter?"

"I was asking Doris if Winter ever mentioned him to her," I said.

"Not to Doris he didn't. She's only got two ideas in her silly head—pictures and clothes." He glanced at Doris and she gave him a sullen look but said nothing. "But he talked about Sir Adrian to me all right. Proper basket by all accounts. Stuck-up nob. Did ole Dickie out of a lot of money. His own brother, too. I tell yer, some people ain't human. . . . But Dickie wasn't taking that lying down. Not him. I can see his face now when he told me about it. Wasn't he livid! He put the law on Sir Adrian and that made him sit up. Took a long time, but in the end Sir Adrian had to pay. We had a real good celebration that night, Oysters an' all!"

"Would you have said that Winter was the sort of man to commit suicide?"

"'Course not." Ben was contemptuous of the suggestion. "But you said it was an accident."

I nodded. "Just asking a question, that's all."

Ben was silent for a moment. Then he said: "Well, what about a drink? Being a sad occasion like."

He went behind the counter and found a bottle of Scotch. He poured out some generous tots. He gave us each a glass except Doris.

"Don't I have any?" she said.

"Not wasting good Scotch on you, my girl," he replied. Then he raised his glass. "To Dickie Winter," he said. "One of the best."

We drank.

All the while I watched Doris. I wanted to know what part she had played in this curious haven of escape which Winter had created. A girl who never went to the theatre, and yet who had fallen many times for the personable wiles of visiting actors. It was ironic.

We had several more drinks and then Ben had to attend to his customers. As he served a soldier and his girl friend I drew Doris aside.

"I think I'll have a gin," the girl was saying.

"Not on this trip you won't," said the soldier. "It's either beer or nothing."

I took Doris over to a table on the other side. Stuart watched me with a quizzical lift of his eyebrows.

"Now, Doris, I want you to tell me—was Mr. Winter in love with you?"

Her lips twisted up. "'Course not. I don't believe in that nonsense!" she said.

"When he stayed here. . . . did he ever spend the night with you?"

It was an awkward question and I fully expected her to fly into an indignant rage. She did nothing. Her head moved slowly round until her eyes were on me. Then she said quite casually: "Now and then."

Just like that. No excuses, no preamble. A bald admission. Her face remained impassive and you couldn't tell if she was even interested.

Presently she got up.

"I must go and help Uncle," she said.

She sidled off, a living example of that crack about beauty being only skin deep.

Stuart and I didn't stay much longer. We thanked Ben and he asked us to come and see him any time. He'd be glad of the company. Then we emerged into the dismal street again.

The horse butchers had closed and the queue was gone. But the ragged children were still playing football, even though it was rapidly getting dusk.

Stuart said: "What do you think now?"

"I don't know," I said.

"I'm so afraid that you'll get on to the wrong track in this business. I mean, the wrong track is so obvious."

"Suppose you tell me which it is."

He laughed. "My dear fellow, I'm not paid your salary. You're supposed to know about these things. In any case, it'll be rather fun watching you go astray."

He said it with an air of omniscience that irritated me.

CHAPTER FIVE

STUART had a place off Fleet Street in a dingy block of offices which housed some of the lesser agencies and several rather dubious corporations. Strictly speaking, the rooms were only meant as offices, but Stuart was so broke he lived in his. It was sparsely furnished and dreadfully untidy. There was no bath and only a small gas ring for heating kettles.

He insisted on my having a meal with him. We shared a tin of war-time soup, the kind with pieces of garden path to help out the vegetables. Then we consumed some dry bread and some cheese of indeterminate age. Finally, he produced two cups of muddy coffee. The mixture was distinctly disturbing.

He talked ceaselessly. One story after another couched in his glib, amusing manner. The hero was always himself. He had done everything, it seemed. Celebrities had opened their doors to him, actresses had implored him to make love to them, dictators had sought his advice on the governing of their flocks, and revolutions had been started beyond the Andes entirely on his provocative prose. Of the war he was strangely silent, conscious probably that it marked the beginning of his decline and fall.

You could not doubt his brilliance. There were times when his eyes burned with a gem-like flame, when genius seemed to hover over his gesticulating hands. But at the same moment you noticed the lazy curve of his body, the supercilious regard he had for humanity, and the over-developed intelligence that was his worst enemy. He was a man divided against himself. Eventually he stopped talking and I brought things back to Richard Winter.

"What did you mean by saying I might get on the wrong track?" I asked him.

He sank farther into a chair, that was decorated with several pairs of discarded socks.

"Nothing much."

"You know a lot about Winter," I said. "You haven't told me all of it."

He smiled sardonically. "I took you down to 'The Bells.' What more do you want?"

"Everything."

"Didn't Ben and Doris provide you with a clue?"

"No." I lit a cigarette and passed him one. "They merely presented me with another facet of Winter's character. There are so many facets I doubt if I'll ever come to the end of them."

"Of course you won't, my dear chap. That's what makes it so fascinating. How many men can one man be?"

"I'm only interested in why he died."

"Ah." His voice was edged with sarcasm. "There speaks the police mind. It will lead you astray if you're not careful."

I said nothing.

Suddenly he laughed. "I bet you a fiver you don't solve this case. It's too big for you."

"Think so?"

"Well . . . I bet I solve it before you do anyway."

"What exactly do you know?"

As I spoke I glanced around the room. Over in the far corner under the window was a desk. On it an old typewriter, heavy with dust, almost buried by a chaotic mound of papers. Then a divan that sagged drunkenly on three legs and some built-in shelves filled with a variety of books. Grimy linoleum covered the floor. It reminded you of the setting of the last act of an arty play where the wayward genius has finally decided to give up the struggle.

"Will you take me on?" he said. "Five pounds."

So he was in earnest. "Only on one condition. You tell me what you know."

"Why should I do that? Besides, it would probably mean nothing to you anyway." He paused. "Could you let me have another cigarette?"

I fished out my packet and handed it to him.

"Thanks . . . You know, I'm very enthusiastic about the biography. It will be the best thing I've ever done."

"Christine may make difficulties," I reminded him.

"I'll deal with her. Winter is a subject that appeals to me immensely. It will be candid and caustic. I shall reveal

his character little by little. Like undoing a much-wrapped parcel. . . . I think you ought to take on that bet, you know."

I shook my head. "Not unless you give me all the facts."

"But I've given you most of them. All that remains is the key. With your organisation you should be able to find that out for yourself." He blew smoke down in his nose. "I'm frightfully broke," he added. "Could you, by chance, lend me a pound? I'll pay you back when they've squared me for this obituary they're printing to-morrow."

I smiled. On two previous occasions he'd borrowed money but he'd never paid it back. "I'll lend you a pound if . . ."

"If I tell you the rest of my facts. I might have guessed you'd want to strike a bargain. . . . Still, perhaps I can tell you. I doubt if you'll see the significance in it that I see."

"I'll chance that," I said.

"Well . . . you've probably heard wild stories about Winter's emotional life. People have suggested he was all kinds of things. Some even hinted that he was peculiar. It's not true. Winter's emotions are the key to his character. If you understand them correctly, it shouldn't take you long to clear up the case. But I don't think you'll understand them with that police mind of yours.

"These rumours about Winter were circulated by malicious women whose advances he disdained. Women of high society. Much sought-after women. They fell for Winter in heaps. But he avoided them. He refused invitation after invitation. They said he was cold, unemotional, perverted. But that was a lie.

"Famous people have always interested me. I have tried hard to discover what they are really like under that mask they present to the outside world. Winter has never ceased to intrigue me. I'd heard all these stories, but I wasn't inclined to believe them.

"Well, one night I was in Kilburn in a restaurant there. Who should I see at a nearby table but Winter. With him was a rather over-painted little piece. Winter seemed to be enjoying himself and the girl was giggling continually at the things he was saying. Fortunately he didn't recognise me. In any case he only knew me vaguely by sight.

"I followed them when they left the restaurant. They

went to a small block of single room flats and Winter stayed there for several hours. I made a note of the number of the flat and discovered the girl's name. She worked in a big store in Oxford Street.

"Finally I managed to strike up an acquaintance with her and I soon discovered that she didn't know who Winter was. She called him Mr. Edwards and it was evident that she had no suspicion that her lover was the great actor. He had told her that he travelled in millinery and this accounted for the erratic times at which he saw her. He had first met her by following her down to Edgware in the tube.

"You can imagine how surprised I was. I began to devote more attention to Winter. I made a lot of enquiries because I was intensely intrigued. I soon discovered that this was not the only girl Winter had picked up in this way. He was always doing it and few of the girls knew who he really was. If they did find out, then he left them abruptly and they never saw him again.

"Yes, Richard Winter who disdained the most beautiful women in London would go out of his way to pick up a shop-girl. He would behave in a ridiculously childish manner. Like some suburban youth. It was a revelation to me. You see, I know a good many actors and without exception they all use their reputations and their theatrical fame to make their feminine conquests. Their personalities and their profession are inseparable. Yet, here was Winter pretending to be anything but an actor, inventing fictitious names and false characters. And what for? To seduce some ordinary little girl, some creature whom you would have thought was quite beneath his intelligence."

While he was speaking I thought of that Winter who, according to Ben, had signed endless grubby little autograph books presented by children; who would buy sweets for the urchins who hung around the stage-door. A paradox of a man.

"... That's all I have to tell you. You now have the key to Richard Winter."

Was it the key? Stuart was sitting there, smiling confidently. And I was in a fog. I had another fact to work on, but I didn't see the significance of it at that moment.

"Do you get it?" he asked.

"Not exactly."

"I knew you wouldn't. It's your police mind. You want

clues, strong motives, inflamed passions. That's always your background to murder."

"Suppose you tell me," I said.

"I wouldn't dream of it." His face was flushed with excitement.

His arrogance irritated me. I felt a complete fool. And in worrying over my wounded vanity I completely missed the point of what he had told me.

I arrived at the Regent Theatre in a very bad temper. If I had had the power, I would have put all the people connected with the case into a cell and thrown away the key. A childish mood, no doubt, but even policemen get that way sometimes.

The stage-door keeper said that the show wouldn't ring down for ten minutes or so. I went to find Elliot. I discovered him in the green-room in earnest conversation with a blonde with large saucer eyes and a chromium plated giggle. He introduced her to me. She was apparently understudying two of the smaller parts.

She giggled at everything Elliot said. She even giggled when she mentioned how sad it was about Mr. Winter. I couldn't stand it.

I kept trying to catch Elliot's eye. Eventually I succeeded and he followed me out of the room.

"So this is how you spend your time," I said angrily. "I suppose you haven't spoken to Janet Winter yet?"

"No, sarge. The curtain had gone up by the time I got here."

"What about the intervals?"

"Well, I . . ."

"You were too busy talking to that blonde."

"No, sarge."

"Then what the devil were you doing?"

He gave a superior sort of smile. "I had a word with Gerald Carson."

"Who the hell is that?"

"The actor who's temporarily taking Winter's place. Winter's understudy." He paused impressively. "I think when you've spoken to him, sarge, you'll agree that the case is closed."

"Closed?" I thought he had gone off his head.

"I know it sounds screwy. But he swears it's true."

You'd better come and talk to him. He gets off the stage before the final curtain. We can catch him now."

He led me down a corridor to a dressing-room on the left. He knocked at the door and walked in. I followed him.

A typical dressing-room with a bench and mirrors all along one wall, the mirrors lit by naked bulbs. A battered screen and an old-fashioned settee and some cane chairs.

Gerald Carson was sitting on one of the cane chairs. He was made-up for his heavy character part on the stage. He had seemed a good deal more impressive when I had seen him from the front on the first night.

Elliot introduced me and we shook hands. His palm was damp with sweat. He resembled a fifth carbon copy of Richard

Winter. Continually understudying the great actor he had grown with the passage of the years physically somewhat similar. But there was no personality behind that mask of grease-paint. The eyes were dead, the chin was narrow. The fire that made Richard Winter was absent. Gerald Carson was a timid individual, scared to death of himself.

"You can spare us a little time?" I asked.

He nodded. "I have to take the curtain in about ten minutes." His hand shook as he reached for a cigarette. "You must excuse me. I've been jittery all day ever since I heard about poor Winter."

"You knew him well, of course?"

He rubbed a thin finger down his frayed dressing-gown. "As I was telling the other gentleman here, I've understudied Winter for the last fifteen years. Got to know him pretty well in that time. He was a great actor, you know. I don't think people realised quite how great." He paused. "It was a terrible shock. I'm afraid I've given a very bad performance to-night. Still, I'm only playing until the end of the week. Then someone else is taking over."

"That's rather bad luck," I said.

"Oh, I'm not really good enough for such a large part, you know." He smiled wanly, looking a little absurd with the false moustache and the heavy fake lining. "It's only the third time that I've ever gone on for Winter in the whole ten years. He had an immense constitution although he tried his best to destroy it."

"Just so," I said. I glanced at Elliot who was twiddling his fingers. On the wall behind him some nervous actor had drawn a rather lewd caricature with a

carmine grease-paint. Others had contented themselves with writing their names in a pencilled circle. "Now, Mr. Carson, we are merely pursuing a routine enquiry. When a man dies as Richard Winter died there has to be an inquest."

"He was drowned in his bath, wasn't he?"

"That's right. But it's not quite as simple as that. You see, he hadn't lived in his house in Hampstead for several months. Yet he seems to have gone back there on last Friday night. How long he was alive after that we do not know. But it appears he started to pack some clothes and then drew a bath. As there was no heating, the bath was cold. That part is what puzzles us."

Carson spread out his hands. "Well. . . . I suppose he was drunk."

"Yes. But I understand that when he was drunk he was perfectly coherent right up to the time when he suddenly blacked out?"

"That's true. He gave the appearance of being quite normal. But he never was. And there was no telling when this black-out would come. I remember that he once collapsed crossing the street in Chicago. They had to bring an ambulance to get him away." Carson shook his head sadly. "It was such a pity. We tried so hard to keep him off the drink. But when you are dealing with a genius it is very difficult. He had an uncontrollable temper and if he got the idea that anyone was attempting to influence him he would grow as sullen as a child."

Fifteen years of understudying Richard Winter. Fifteen years as an actor and only three appearances on the stage. Sitting in hundreds of green rooms the world over, made up ready to act but never acting. It would be heart-breaking to most people and yet Carson seemed to have slipped into a groove. He gave you the impression that he didn't want to appear on the stage. He would have been content to understudy Winter for another fifteen years if the actor had that long. The truth was he no longer had any ambition.

"You think then, Mr. Carson, that providing Winter sufficiently drunk there's nothing strange about what he did?"

"From my knowledge of him it would seem reasonable."

"Even the taking of a cold bath?"

"Well. . . . he might have thought it was hot, might he? I mean, he wouldn't find out until he got in it."

"That's possible. Yet. . . ." Somehow I could

swallow that bit about the cold bath. No matter how drunk a man was I couldn't conceive of his getting into a bath without realising that the water was icy cold.

"Have you any particular reason for your conviction, Mr. Carson?"

He hesitated before he answered. He looked at Elliot, then patted his false moustache twice to make sure it wasn't coming away, and said: "I was telling the gentleman here—it happened once before. Almost identical circumstances." He spoke in a whisper.

"Happened once before?" I didn't quite get what he meant.

"In New York," he said. "About six years ago. He was playing Hamlet at the time. Right on top of his form. Then one afternoon he got terribly drunk. He came back to the hotel apartment and would insist on having a bath. I was there at the time because Mrs. Winter had grown very worried. You see, he'd been away since the end of the performance the night before. I begged him to lie down and not to have a bath until later. He wouldn't listen. He locked himself in the bathroom and I heard him turning on the taps. Fifteen minutes passed and I didn't hear any noise from the bathroom. I began to get worried. I banged on the door. There was no reply. I banged louder. Still no reply.

"I rushed out and got hold of a liftman and together we broke open the bathroom door. Winter was lying unconscious in the bath. His head had slipped down and was almost under water. We were only just in time. A doctor was called and he said that Winter had probably got into the bath and was standing up when the alcohol caused a black-out. He fell backwards, hitting his head against the back of the bath. The blow knocked him out."

I began to wonder why no one had told me of this before. Surely Mrs. Winter must have known. Even Janet. Yet it had been left to Carson to stick a large pin in the balloon I'd been blowing up. It knocked me back quite a bit, but it did not entirely convince me. I still couldn't get over the cold bath. All the same, I could see what Elliot meant. If Carson went into the witness-box and told that story no coroner's jury would hesitate to bring in a verdict of accidental death.

"How many people knew of this?" I asked.

"Well, the doctor knew, naturally, I bribed the liftman

to say nothing because obviously we didn't want that kind of story to get about."

"Yes, yes, but how many of the cast knew?"

"All of them, I expect. I mean the performance for that night had to be cancelled."

An idea was forming in my brain. *Winter had nearly died.* That was the point and all the people around him knew that. It was a marvellous opportunity for anyone who wanted to do him in. The circumstances merely had to be repeated.

"Tell me," I said. "Was this a cold bath he took?"

"Er—no."

"Can you ever remember him taking a cold bath?"

"I can't say I can."

He looked at his watch which lay on the bench. Then he got up. "I'm afraid you gentlemen will have to excuse me. The curtain will be down in a couple of minutes now. You can't always rely on the call-boy here. You know what it is in war-time."

I got up, too. "There's just one other point, Mr. Carson. I understand that on two days of last week during rehearsal Winter received a couple of notes. We have found those notes. They merely consisted of a couple of pages torn from a printed copy of *Macbeth*. Somebody had scribbled the word 'remember' across the top of each. Have you any idea what they might mean?"

Carson was at the door. "I should say it was just a malicious trick. Winter made many enemies in the profession, you know. And one of his peculiarities was a hatred of *Macbeth*. He loathed the play . . . Well, I shall be back presently if you care to wait." He nodded to us and stalked out.

"Well?" asked Elliot.

"Damn it," I exploded. "Winter was murdered. I'd wager everything I had on it."

"Maybe." Elliot continued to twirl the match-stick between his fingers. "But can we prove it?"

"The cold bath," I said. "That's the only loophole. The one mistake the murderer made."

Elliot grew cynical. "I don't think you'd hang anybody on that. Why don't we call it a day and go home?"

"We haven't had the doctor's report yet."

"Doctor's report!" Elliot snorted. "It doesn't mean a damn' thing. All right, suppose the doctor swears that, in his

opinion, Winter was murdered. Then immediately some specialist is called in and will he agree with the doctor? Not on your life. They'll argue till the cows come home. The jury won't understand any of it."

"But the time of death," I said. "That's important."

"Sarge, you're slipping." He tossed the match away. "Time you've had two or three pathologists snooping around, Winter will have died on Friday, Saturday, and Sunday. And each of 'em will have yards of Latin to prove it. I think it's hopeless myself."

"You're forgetting Janet Winter," I said. "She has a nice strong motive and she admits she went to the Hampstead house on Friday."

Elliot brushed the ash off his trousers. "Oh, she's up to some jiggery pokery of her own, no doubt. But can you honestly imagine her popping Winter into a cold bath and drowning him? No, not the type. If she wanted to kill him she'd soak flypapers for months and then gradually poison his porridge. I know her kind."

"Elliot," I said. "You are being defeatist. I know you are aching to roll that blonde understudy on the nearest divan. But you will have to wait until we have solved the case. Because we are going to solve it. I've betted five pounds on it."

He looked up, astonished. "You've what? My God, you're nuts!"

When we went to Janet Winter's dressing room I was in a very determined frame of mind. I was going to make it tough for her. The fact that she was a friend of mine was going to mean nothing to me. Not a thing. There are times when a harassed detective is willing to build a case against his grandmother rather than have no case at all. And this was one of those times.

We waited for her to get into a dressing gown and then I started on her while she was removing her make-up. A woman is at a disadvantage smearing cold cream over her face, but she managed to look amazingly attractive. My resolve weakened, but I took the plunge.

"Now, Janet," I said. "We've done a lot of combing around and it seems you haven't told us all of the truth."

She set down the towel and twisted in her chair.

But I kept right on and didn't let her get a word in.

"Why didn't you tell me that your father nearly died in similar circumstances in Chicago six years ago while he was playing Hamlet?"

"I—well—I'd really forgotten all about it. I do remember now hearing something. But I was at school at the time."

"All right," I said. "We'll leave that. Now, according to what you told me you went to the Hampstead house last Friday night. You went there because you thought your father might be there."

"Yes."

"What gave you that idea?"

"Well . . . I'd tried everywhere else." She was a little disconcerted by my attack. But now she picked up her towel and resumed the removal of her make-up.

"And you didn't see him there?"

"I've told you I didn't."

"That's rather strange. You see, on Friday night about ten o'clock he got into a taxi at the Bells, a public house in the East End, and told the driver to take him to the Hampstead house. What time did you go there?"

"Eleven o'clock, I should think."

"Do you still say you didn't meet him?"

"Yes." This question had shaken her quite a bit.

"And on Sunday morning you went to the house again and this time you found him. You spoke to him about the show and he said he would see that a letter was sent to his bank. That letter was never sent. Yet he wrote one which Lewis got on Monday morning at the theatre here."

"That's quite right," she said.

"Now," I said. "Were you aware that your father, during the last two years, was accustomed to go off for days at a time? He went to this public house in the East End."

She thrust the towel aside and put the lid on the tin of cold cream. "I suspected that he disappeared periodically but I didn't know where he went. Christine was at such pains to cover it up that I never asked."

I turned to Elliot. "Have you got the letter?" I asked.

He nodded, fumbled in his pocket and handed it to me.

It was the first time I had studied it at all carefully and before I passed it to Janet I read it again. The address on the top was the Hampstead house. It read:

"Dear Mason,

I'm afraid that circumstances quite beyond my control will prevent me from appearing in your play. I'm sorry to give you such short notice. However, later you will understand.

It has suddenly occurred to me that you may have financial difficulties with the bank over the expenses of the show. I said I would back you and my non-appearance in the show does not alter this promise in any way. I am therefore sending a letter to the bank authorising them to make the necessary disbursements from my account.

I hope all goes well to-morrow night.

Sincerely,

Richard Winter."

I passed it to Janet. "We have reasons for believing that the letter is a forgery," I said.

She gasped. "A forgery! You mean that father didn't write it?"

"Do you think he did?"

Her face was pale. She toyed with a comb. "Of course. Who else would have written it?"

"Look at it again," I said. "Doesn't it strike you as a rather odd letter? This show was to have been your father's come-back. On Friday he vanishes. Evidently he knows then that he will not be appearing in the play. Yet he leaves it until Sunday before he lets anyone know, and that only after you had spoken to him."

"Father was eccentric," she replied. "He never did any of the things ordinary people would do."

"Granted. But, even so, that letter seems all wrong. It just says the necessary things and nothing more. It is a cold, factual letter. Besides, if he was going to write to the bank, why didn't he do so at the same time and post the two letters together?"

"That's what he said he would do."

I got up and paced the small dressing room. People were banging along the corridors. Somebody was whistling a rag-time number. In the next room an argument was going on. One actor was accusing another one of cutting his lines. "You left me absolutely high and dry. Unless you give me that cue I can't possibly speak my exit line. I just had to walk off looking a complete fool . . .

There are other people on the stage besides yourself, you know."

I smiled at the fragments of conversation that filtered through the wall. Elliot was sitting there, very bored. His face was quite expressionless.

"Now, Janet?" I said, "you still feel that your father wrote this letter?"

"But, of course."

"What exactly did he say to you on Sunday morning?"

"I've already told you."

"Did he give any reason for leaving the show?"

"No."

"Did you ask him?"

"Yes, but he wouldn't tell me. He acted rather mysteriously I thought."

I swung round and stood facing her. "I suggest that he never wrote that letter at all. I suggest, too, that you never saw him on Sunday morning. I don't think you went to the Hampstead house on Sunday. I think that you met him when you went there on Friday night."

"No!" It was a startled gasp.

"Because I'm convinced that he was not alive on Sunday morning. He was lying dead in that bath. It would have been a one-sided conversation if you'd spoken to him then. . . . Now, it'll be easier if you tell me the truth."

Her face went several shades paler. She seemed to be fighting a battle with herself. She clenched and unclenched her hands and then stood up and leant with her back against the bench.

"All right," she said slowly. "I did see him on Friday night."

"That's better. Now tell me what happened." I was conscience-struck at the harsh way I had attacked her. "Take it quietly. And see if you can remember exactly what he said." I offered her a cigarette.

"Thanks . . . I'd wanted to keep this a secret but I suppose that's impossible. I don't know why you're making all these enquiries. You can't possibly believe that Father's death was anything but an accident."

"Unfortunately I do," I said.

"God!" she murmured. "I've been a perfect fool." She puffed nervously at the cigarette. "You see, when Father disappeared from the theatre on Friday, Lewis and I

were very worried. The management here are not very easy to get on with and it was only Father's influence and the fact that he was appearing in the play that made them agree to let the theatre at all. The money side was typical of Father. He did it all very haphazard. Consequently we knew that if he didn't appear the management would close down on us. Still, we felt sure he would turn up on Saturday morning. At least, Lewis did. But I knew Father. I thought it was quite on the cards he would disappear for a week or more. I determined to run him to earth. I was desperately anxious that Lewis' play should succeed. You see, up till that Friday it had looked as though everything was running smoothly. Father seemed to be absolutely off the drink. But when he suddenly arrived in the morning in that paralytic condition I saw the red light at once. Of course, I didn't discourage Lewis. He's terribly sensitive and he was worried enough as it was.

"I tried all the places I thought Father might be, but I couldn't locate him. Finally, in desperation, I remembered the house at Hampstead. I knew that Christine had found him there once before when he had been away for three days."

I snapped down on her. "Why didn't you tell me that this morning?"

"I didn't think of it. It was all such a shock. Anyway, I went to the house at about eleven o'clock on Friday night. I rang the bell, but I didn't get any answer. I was just going away when I heard a noise upstairs. So I went round the back and got in through one of the windows. Upstairs in a bedroom I found Father. He was sitting on the bed and around him were piles of clothes."

"The room near the bathroom?" I asked.

"Yes. He was very drunk and he seemed dreadfully annoyed that I had come there to find him. I asked him why he had walked out on the show. He said he wasn't going to play in it. He was through with it. 'But,' I said, 'what about the money. You've arranged to back it?'"

"'I don't give a damn,' he said. 'It's a lousy play anyway. Now will you get out and leave me in peace!'"

"I argued with him, but he just wouldn't talk sense. I told him that he must write a letter to his bank if he was leaving the show. That he couldn't let it down. That seemed to amuse him. 'Can't I let it down! You watch me. You won't get a penny out of me for the bloody thing. I've finished with it, see!'"

"I asked him what had happened, but he wouldn't tell me. I explained that if there was anything he didn't like or anything which had upset him then we would have it altered. But he was in a strange mood. Apart from the fact he was drunk, he seemed to be in such a violent temper. I said that if he had intended to walk out on the play why had he started it at all. 'Because I had to,' he replied. 'But it's no longer necessary now. I'm through.' Then he laughed and started fumbling with the clothes he was putting into a suitcase. I asked him if he had told Christine. 'That blasted cow,' he said. 'I'm telling her nothing! She can go and take a running jump at herself!'

"I still argued. I tried to appeal to his love for the theatre, but he wouldn't listen. He only raved all the more. He said he was going to cut me out of his will, that he hated the sight of me. I begged him to write a letter to the bank, but he wouldn't. I'd never seen him like that before. His temper grew worse and so, in the end, I decided to leave. I could do nothing."

"What time did you leave," I said.

"Just before midnight, I should say."

"Was he drawing a bath then?"

"No. He said he was going to leave himself in a few minutes. I suggested that we might share a taxi, but he scoffed at the idea. With that I left him."

"It took me some time to find a cab and when I got back Lewis was waiting for me. He was very anxious and wanted to know if I had found Father. What could I tell him? If I told him the truth, all those horrible things Father had said, it would send him into a flat spin. Besides, somehow I was determined that the play should go on. And the less Lewis knew the better. He gets into despair so quickly."

"I said that I hadn't seen Father, but that he would probably turn up at rehearsals in the morning. Of course, he didn't come. By Saturday evening Lewis said that the show would have to be abandoned. I had been to the management and explained that Father was ill. They had taken it all right, but there was still the money question. I promised Lewis that I would have another shot at finding Father. Actually I knew that if I saw him again he wouldn't alter his opinion."

"I decided on Sunday that there was only one thing to do. To save the show the management must have a letter pur-

porting to come from Father. I know it sounds terribly dishonest, but I had such faith in Lewis' play I didn't think it would matter. I sat down and wrote the letter myself, addressing it to Lewis. I didn't dare send one to the bank since I felt sure they would see it was a forgery.

"Lewis got the letter on Monday and showed it to me. He was very disappointed, but when the management saw it they were willing for the show to go on. It was such short notice that we had to use Father's understudy. He's not good. Still, fortunately, it hasn't made all the difference.

"I realise now that I was mad to write that letter, but then I didn't know that Father was going to die." She stopped speaking and sat down on the chair again. Her cigarette had gone out and I lit it again for her.

"Have you any idea what was in your father's mind? Why he was packing those clothes? Why he left the show?" I asked.

She shook her head.

I looked at her and she seemed to be speaking the truth. "Did you know that he had left you all his money in his will?"

She stared at me. "That he had done what!" she exclaimed.

"Left you all his money. He did hint to the bank manager recently that he was going to change the will, but apparently he had not done so at the time of his death."

It was a tremendous shock to her. For a moment she sat very still and then suddenly she burst into tears. They played havoc with the outdoor make-up she was in the process of putting on.

"I didn't know," she said. "It makes me feel such a beast. I never took any trouble to understand him. None of us did . . ."

It was embarrassing for Elliot and myself. You can't very well level a tentative charge of murder against a woman when she's in that state. It wasn't such a hot hypothesis anyway. When you saw her sitting there, her lips quivering and the tears streaming down her face, you forgot the sophisticated actress. You were conscious only that she was very young and very, very much in love.

So we left her, shutting the door quietly behind us. Out in the corridor, Elliot said: "Wasn't that a trifle heavy-handed, sarge?"

"I suppose it was," I said.

We strolled out of the theatre and into the gloomy street. I was beginning to feel intolerably tired. If only I could have got Winter out of my mind I'd have dropped the whole case there and then. But somehow the man haunted me. Until I knew the truth I wouldn't get any peace. I guess there was a lot of thwarted vanity mixed up in it, too.

"I tell you one thing," I said to Elliot. "I'm certain that Winter died on Friday night."

Elliot smiled. "You work too hard. All right, suppose Winter died on Friday night where does it get us? Nowhere."

"It's important that he died on Friday night," I said.

He yawned. "The most important thing to me just now is to get some sleep. Unless you want me any more I'm getting back to the section house."

"Okay," I said. "Don't be late in the morning."

He ambled off across Oxford Street which was practically devoid of traffic. Only an occasional taxi or a slow-moving bus. One almost forgot what it had been like in peace-time when the whole thoroughfare had been crammed tight with vehicles of every description.

Anna was sitting reading when I got in. She put her finger to her lips to tell me that the offspring was asleep. Then when I got close to her she said: "So you've showed up at last. How many people have you hanged?"

"Nobody," I said. "That's the trouble."

"You're just callous . . . By the way, there's a letter for you."

"A bill?"

"No, I don't think so. Looked something like Uncle Fred's handwriting."

But it wasn't Uncle Fred's handwriting. I stripped the envelope open and a slim sheet of paper fluttered out. On it was written in block capitals rather crudely formed:

WINTER DIED ON SATURDAY NIGHT.

I stared at the paper. Anna picked up her book again. "There's some cold meat in the kitchen and some pickles. . . . Who's the letter from?"

The postmark was Hampstead. I passed it over to her. "Your guess is as good as mine," I said.

CHAPTER SIX

IT WAS a peaceful night for the first four hours. But precisely at three o'clock a German plane came over the city and the sirens sounded. This woke Anna, who wanted to dress at once and go to the basement. I said it would be better to wait. The plane seemed to hover about for a time and I hoped that John wouldn't wake up. He seemed to be lying in the cot hard asleep.

Suddenly all the guns in the world fired at the plane and it dived with a fearsome whine. Well, naturally, that was the signal for us to get up and transport the infant to the special anti-everything shelter in the basement. Personally, I do not think it is a very good shelter, but still, most people think they're safe in it which is perhaps all that matters.

Miss Pain arrived in curlers and a dressing gown. She started to knit. She said it would probably be a very big raid. I think Hitler must have told her so.

All I heard was the solitary plane that seemed bent on committing suicide. The guns were belching hell at it. John voiced his disapproval of the whole proceedings. He bawled his head off, and Miss Pain said it was a terrible thing for so young a child to be in an air raid. The fact that he had been away in the country for months and that we had had no raid for the last I don't know how long, did not influence her at all. She said might she try and quiet him down. So Anna passed John to her and the old spinster paced the floor of the shelter jerking him up and down in her arms. He objected to this treatment and finally I had to take him.

I did everything but stand on my head to amuse him. But he was unimpressed. Suddenly he stopped crying and I felt that my methods had succeeded. Not a bit of it. He had caught sight of my cigarette case. This was lying on the bench and he grabbed hold of it and somehow had it open. The cigarettes fascinated him. He proceeded to pull them out and squeeze them to pieces.

"Hey," I said, "That's all the cigarettes I have until the morning!"

"Oh, let him have them," said Miss Pain. "They make him happy."

"Yes," said Anna. "He's quite content now, see."

"All right, I'll be a martyr," I replied, and watched the last of the cigarettes arriving, a battered wreck, on the floor.

The German plane disappeared and there was no noise any more. I thought we could get back to bed, but Miss Pain was certain that at least a thousand bombers were heading for London at that very moment. "Besides," she added, "we must wait for the all clear."

And did we wait!

I got cramp sitting there. Even John wore himself out playing with the cigarette case and fell asleep in Anna's arms. An hour of complete silence went by and then the dismal note of the "All Clear" sounded.

We all got up and climbed the stairs. Miss Pain seemed disappointed about the raid. "Still," she said. "I expect they got it bad somewhere." There was a sort of relish in her voice as she bid us good-night and went into her flat.

Of course, after that I couldn't get to sleep. I turned this way and that but it was useless. I was convinced that if I had had a cigarette it would have been all right. But I had no cigarettes at all. Anna said it was terrible how some people had no control over themselves and why didn't I take up Yogi. She had just read a book on it. What you did was to sit on the bathroom floor and do exercises first thing in the morning.

Well, I was rude about that.

She was rude back and turned over and went to sleep. I began to think about the case. That was no cure for insomnia, either. The more I thought the more mixed up I became. In the end I convinced myself that I had killed Winter by thought transference. I had fallen asleep when I reached that conclusion.

As soon as it grew light I got up. I ached in every bone. Anna was not conscious and John was miraculously dead to the world. I crept out of the room, dressed in the lounge, shaved, and then made some breakfast.

I then went down to the station, found a message there that Sir Adrian Winter wanted to see me, and took a cab to the mortuary.

The old sergeant in charge of the place was very dismal. It appeared that rheumatism was restricting his activity and that he wasn't able to afford to drink Scotch any more. These

two things loomed as major disasters on his limited horizon. He said that the war was going to last at least fifteen years, maybe twenty, and that suicides were increasing.

"Most of 'em use gas," he said gloomily. "Now, if it was me, I'd much rather drown."

I said I didn't want to do any of these things. I told him I was too busy to commit suicide.

"You can never tell. A man's all right one day and then—snap! his mind's gone out of gear. He wakes up wanting to kill himself. It's civilisation," he said. "We want to get back to Nature."

I could see this might go on all the morning, so I cut him short and asked if the doctor was there.

"Yes, he's here. Been cutting up that actor bloke. Suicide, I suppose?"

"I wouldn't know," I said.

He led me past the slabs with their gruesome contents. He had a little story to tell about each one and you just couldn't stop him.

Eventually we reached the doctor who was washing his hands over a sink. The sergeant hung around for a few minutes and then said it was time he took his medicine and he shuffled away.

"Well, doc," I said. "What's the worst?"

He wiped his hands, blew his nose, and peered at me through his spectacles. Then he took his spectacles off and peered at me without them.

"What do you want me to say?"

"I want the truth."

He laughed. "Now, don't be silly, Warren. Which way is the evidence going?"

I sighed. "Doc, did Winter die by accident or was he bumped off?"

"Oh, I can't tell you a thing like that. More than my job is worth. I can give you certain conclusions but nothing more."

"What's come over you?" I said.

"A little bird whispered that there might be a second opinion called in. So I'm playing safe, understand?"

"But I'm not asking for a statement. Just want something off the record, that's all."

"I see. Well, first, I'd say that he died between tea-time on Friday and about ten o'clock on Saturday night."

"And the blow on the back of the head?"

"Might have been foul play. Might not. You see, this chap has an extraordinarily sensitive skin. There are people like that. Bruised easy. Thin, if you understand me. He had loaded up a lot of alcohol before he died. He was a toper. Must have soaked himself in it for years."

It seemed to be all travelling against me.

"Would you say he could have blacked out from the alcohol, fallen and caused that bruise on the back of his head?"

"Yes, it's possible."

"Or could someone have faked it?"

"That's possible, too."

I leant with my back to the sink.

"Not very helpful, doc."

"Look," he said. "I've been in this business for years. There are certain things you can say definitely and certain things you can't. I've seen experts get up in court and talk utter cock and get away with it. For your private ear, I'm inclined to think that this chap was murdered. I'd say that someone dotted him one when he was in his bath. But unless you have concrete evidence to back up that theory I wouldn't dream of standing by it in court."

"So that's the way it is?"

"Yes. Have you got any concrete evidence that points to foul play?"

"Not at the moment."

"Then unless you get any I shall not commit myself. I got caught once before in a case of drowning. I know I was right and the experts were wrong. But the thing you have to learn in this world is that experts are never wrong. I'm sorry I can't be more explicit, but all the data I have is very incomplete. It could honestly be either way."

We walked through the mortuary together. The doctor took off his white coat and slipped on his tweed jacket. I'd been building a lot on the medical evidence and now there was nothing. Of course, you couldn't blame the doctor. Unless you have seen the way a defending counsel works and the way experts make mincemeat of ordinary general practitioners you can have no conception of the toughness of the courtroom.

"Well, doc, I'll try and dig up some evidence. You see, I have an absolute conviction he didn't die a natural death."

"All right." He smiled and polished his spectacles.

"You get the evidence and I'll stick my neck out. God help me, so I will."

In the entrance I found Stuart talking to the sergeant. Stuart was listening to the tale of woe with remarkable patience. When he saw me he smiled.

"How is the detective this morning?"

"No better for seeing you," I said.

"Tell me, what is the verdict of the post mortem slab?"

"Winter had measles when he was ten," I said.

The doctor was shouting for the sergeant and the sergeant, groaning and complaining, departed. Stuart's eyes twinkled.

"So you're going to hold out on me? Well, I think that's distinctly unfair. After all, I gave you my piece of information. It was worth more than the rest put together. You ought to take me into your confidence. I don't want to lose five pounds, you know." He fumbled in his pocket. "Incidentally, here's that pound you lent me. I managed to get a sub this morning."

I must confess I was surprised to see the pound, but I guessed that Stuart was merely trying to string me along. If he got a scoop on the Winter case it would bring him in quite a lot, despite the fact that the war would crowd it off the front page.

"I'll tell you what the doctor told me," I said. "Apparently, from the medical data it could be either way. Winter could have been the victim of foul play or he could have had an accident. That's all I can get."

"More and more interesting," he said. "Bears out my theory."

"I'm glad to hear that."

"Yes. You know I'm definitely going to beat you to it." He grinned.

I noticed that he hadn't shaved too well, that his collar was badly frayed. There were circles of dirt under his nails. It was extraordinary how little he cared about his appearance. No wonder Fleet Street had tossed him on to the outer fringe.

"Started the biography?" I asked.

"I've planned it out. And I spoke to Christine Winter. She was most gushing. Said I could have all the information I wanted. Wouldn't wonder if it wasn't a best-seller."

"Good," I said.

"Can I offer you a coffee. There's a place over the way?" I didn't get all this courtesy. Stuart obviously wanted to

hang on to me for the rest of the day. He had another guess coming.

"No, thanks," I said. "I must be going. Got a lot of calls to make."

"You sound like the village curate."

"Maybe I am. Who knows?" I smiled at him and started off along the road in search of a cab.

I found Elliot in the C.I.D. office cutting out paper women. He exhibited a chain of them as I came in.

"Don't you think they've got a nice waist-line, sarge?" he said.

"My God!" I exploded. "Haven't you got anything to occupy your time? I thought you were going down to Records?"

"I had them on the blower. They won't know a thing about the hat until this afternoon."

"You ought to have gone down there and shaken them up."

"Wouldn't be any use. You know what it's like, sarge. If they had a moat and a drawbridge they couldn't be more exclusive."

"Oh, well." I sat down. "Suppose we'll have to wait. Any calls?"

Elliot nodded, a smile playing on his thick lips. "Sir Adrian came through twice. He seems suspiciously anxious to see you."

I didn't want to see Sir Adrian. I knew just what he would suggest. The case must be closed. The funeral must take place. And no more nonsense. And really, I had no artillery to fire against him.

Suddenly I remembered the anonymous letter. I showed it to Elliot.

"Came last night," I said. "What do you make of it?"

He turned it over, looking at it. "Woolworth's paper," he said. "Woolworth's envelope."

I sighed. "If you think as fast as that you'll get blood pressure." When he was in one of these moods he was more than exasperating.

"Maybe Sir Ardian wrote it," he said, ignoring my sarcasm. "The spelling's perfect."

"But why should he want to tell me that Winter died on Saturday night?"

"Well, you said he died on Friday night, didn't you?"

"But I didn't tell Sir Adrian."

"No, that's right." Elliot rubbed his chin. "It's an impossible case, sarge. I think we should make it a nice accidental death and go home." He set the paper women up so they formed a ballet group across the desk.

I had a fine, biting retort ready when the phone rang. We both looked at it.

"It'll be Sir Adrian," said Elliot. "What shall I tell him?"

"Oh, tell him I'm coming over to see him now . . . And you get that letter checked up. See if it gives us anything."

Sir Adrian had offices in a large block in Piccadilly. The carpets were thick and there was a knole settee in the waiting room. Everybody in the place seemed to be moving at an enormous speed. Secretaries swept through like galleons in full sail. Typewriters clacked and phones tinkled. It was some time before I could persuade anybody to stop long enough to take my name. Eventually I cornered a bespectacled typist with an icy tilt to her nose. I cut off her retreat and explained who I was.

"Sir Adrian cannot see anybody," she said.

She tried to sweep past me, but I anticipated the move.

"Sir Adrian wants to see me. He's phoned me four times already."

"Well, I don't know. He's got three conferences."

But I kept at her until she got through to Sir Adrian and he said he would see me at once. This annoyed her and she set her nose at an even steeper angle as she led me into the sacred control room.

It was a large office panelled in oak with an enormous desk, behind which sat Sir Adrian. He was smoking a cigar and dictating to a stenographer out of the corner of his mouth. He waved me to a seat and went on dictating.

I waited while he sealed the fate of a minor official in no uncertain terms. There were so many phones on the desk you wondered if they all worked. Minions dashed in and out with cablegrams and letters. And the phones set my doubts at rest by ringing two or three at a time. Sir Adrian still smoked his cigar, barked into the phones, barked at his secretary, and doodled on the blotter.

Presently he was through and the stenographer lifted her

skirts and departed. He fumbled with some papers, stubbed out his cigar, lit another one and then sat back and pierced me with his steel-blue eyes.

"Well, sergeant, what news have you?" A calm, unhurried voice, almost oily in its solicitation.

"I shall need a little more time yet, Sir Adrian."

"You've forgotten all that nonsense about murder, I hope?"

"Not entirely."

The eyes continued to pierce me. The smoke wreathed from the cigar in a thick spiral, partially hiding his expressionless face.

"It's a preposterous idea, you know. I fail to see what you gain by clinging to it."

"As a policeman I've always tried to find out the truth, Sir Adrian."

"Have you any facts to support your theory?"

"No concrete ones."

"And the doctor's report?"

"It could be either way. Accident or murder."

A phone rang and he answered it in a monosyllable. He replaced the receiver, flicked some ash off his cigar, and made a note on a pad in front of him.

"I must confess I do not understand your attitude, sergeant. Surely the whole case is quite straight-forward?"

I accepted the cigarette he offered me. "Too straight-forward, Sir Adrian."

"And what the devil d'you mean by that?"

"I discovered to-day that Richard Winter nearly died in this same manner about six years ago in Chicago."

Sir Adrian examined the end of his cigar.

"Rather proves my point, doesn't it?"

"Yes and no. There is one difference between the two incidents. In Chicago it was a hot bath into which Richard Winter collapsed. Here it was a cold bath. No one seems to remember him ever having a cold bath before, not even when he was very drunk."

"You seem to be building a lot on a very slender point. I understand that the gas had been disconnected. He couldn't have had a hot bath, no matter how much he wanted it. Come now, sergeant, you must see that."

"I see it all right," I said. "But somehow I don't believe it."

Sir Adrian was getting irritated. He rose from his chair and started to pace the room. He didn't look at me as he spoke.

"As a matter of fact, I'll tell you something. This morning I was very worried about what you had said to me. I rang up a very eminent medical man whose name I will not mention. Suffice it to say that he has often been called in on difficult criminal cases and that his evidence is always treated with great respect in a court of law. I explained to him what had happened. His answer was that unless anything unusual was discovered at the post mortem it appeared obvious to him that my brother had met an accidental death. And he said this, fully knowing my brother and his eccentricities."

It was what I would have expected of Sir Adrian. An efficient man. A man who left nothing to chance.

"It doesn't surprise me," I said. "On the present facts any jury would give a verdict of accidental death."

"Then, my dear young fellow, why will you persist in this obstinate attitude. It will avail you nothing. And should you attempt to make an issue of it I should be forced to call in this medical man."

I could tell he was restraining his anger. He was not used to being thwarted in his designs. All his life he had probably rode roughshod over any opposition and something so unsavoury as the threat of a murder case more than offended his sensitive social conscience.

"I know exactly how you feel, Sir Adrian," I said. "But I must satisfy myself that you are right before I close the case. You see, there are various aspects still unexplained. An unknown man attacked me in the garden of the house, and nobody seems to have any idea who it might be. Again, I was not told all of the truth this morning."

His cold eyes stared at me.

"What might you mean by that?"

"When I spoke to Mrs. Winter she assured me for the last two years Richard Winter had been completely on the wagon. She told me how he spent his life during that time. She painted for me a picture which I know now was entirely false. Her story made the case appear very strange indeed. I naturally looked for a motive why Richard Winter, who had been cured for two years, should suddenly drink himself paralytic in the middle of the rehearsals for his come-back production."

"My dear chap, you're splitting hairs."

"Not at all, Sir Adrian. Human beings do not act without motive. Often their motive is an impulsive one, but it nevertheless exists."

"If you could unearth Richard's motives you'd be a very clever man." There was an undertone of sarcasm. "He was a thoroughly irresponsible creature. He didn't give a damn for anybody and he caused untold trouble and unhappiness to others. His death, in many ways, is a blessing." He suddenly burst into a harsh cough which shook him until the veins stood out like cords on his forehead and his face was purple. When the cough subsided he was gasping for breath. He pressed a button on his desk and when his secretary appeared she got him a drink into which he slipped some kind of medicine. It was several minutes before he was normal again.

"Now," he said when he had recovered. "You were speaking of Richard's drinking."

I nodded. "On making investigations I discovered that he never actually gave up alcohol. Whether he drank when he was with Mrs. Winter I do not know. But I do know that every so often he would break out and disappear for two or three days. Sometimes longer."

"Do you know where he went?"

"A public house called the 'Bells' in the East End."

"You've been there?"

"Yes."

"Then you will have met the sort of people who frequent it. The lowest kind of riff-raff. Is it any wonder Mrs. Winter said nothing to you about it? Besides, she suffered enough from Richard when he was alive. He had no conception of what is required from a figure who is perpetually in the public eye. He never even tried to keep up appearances. Any social success he may have had he owes entirely to Mrs. Winter."

I restrained a smile. Richard Winter and social success hardly went together. I began to understand the reason for that Louis XIV furniture and the elegant fairy tale of his intellect and his great interest in the arts. Both Mrs. Winter and Sir Adrian thought Richard should be a social giant. How he must have disappointed them? As time went on I began to entertain a sneaking sympathy for the dead actor.

"Can you imagine," continued Sir Adrian. "Can you

imagine the embarrassment of his widow if it was known that he visited a low public house in such a squalid area, getting hopelessly drunk amid the scum of humanity? Surely that is reason enough for her to attempt to cover up that side of his life altogether?"

I agreed that it was. "But not to the police, Sir Adrian. They can be trusted to keep silent. And in the case of a death like this it was vitally necessary to have all the facts."

"Opinions differ on the integrity of the police, my dear sergeant. However, what do you propose to do now?"

"Continue my investigations."

"Until when?"

"Until I can satisfy myself that I have got at the truth."

Sir Adrian sighed. "I might have expected as much. I suppose it doesn't occur to you that if the inquest and the funeral are unduly delayed malicious people will invent all sorts of rumours. I hold no brief for Richard but he was a famous man and famous men are always a target for the envious shafts of the unsuccessful. Apart from the scandal that such rumours would cause, there are Mrs. Winter's feelings to be considered. She is a very brave woman. Unkind things would be said about her. If it was known that the police were suspicious of Richard's death it might even be suggested that she had killed him herself . . . No, my dear sergeant, for her sake and for the sake of my own position, I do not intend to allow such a debacle to take place."

I was silent for a moment. I felt a little like Elliot. Why not close up the whole business and go home? It was an attractive idea and yet somehow the personality of Richard Winter was too powerful to forget. If I gave in now I should always be wondering exactly why he left the theatre when he did and exactly why he died. It was the emotion of wanting to know which decided me far more, I think, than any question of duty.

"I'm afraid," I said, "I cannot give any statement at an inquest until I am sure in my own mind."

"You're being very difficult, sergeant. I am not quite an unimportant man, you know. If I got in touch with your superiors you might find yourself in an awkward position." He paused and as I said nothing he continued: "How long do you estimate you will need to clear the matter?"

"I cannot give any definite time," I said. "It depends what I succeed in finding out."

His voice grew cold and unemotional. He slid a pencil through his fingers several times, a gold pencil with a tapered barrel.

"So you can't give any definite time! Well, well! Because of a personal desire to make something out of nothing on your part, Mrs. Winter and I are expected to stand by while you jeopardise our positions and tread heavily on her feelings. Before you have finished the affair will have got wide publicity in the press and will have undone all that Mrs. Winter has tried to do in the last few years. You expect me to stand for that?"

"I shall see there is no publicity," I said.

"Very obliging of you, I'm sure. Do you still persist that you can give me no definite time?"

He was angry. He glared at me and then moved back to his desk and picked up a calendar. I knew I was running my head against a wall, but the man's smooth assumption of power irritated me. He was somebody and I was nobody. Therefore, according to the rules of his kind, I was the person to give way. That made me angry, too. I threw caution out of the window. I thought, to hell with it! I'll see him damned first.

He faced me again.

"Well, sergeant?"

"I'm sorry, Sir Adrian. I will be as quick as I can. That is all I can say."

"You are being very foolish, sergeant."

"I have already said I am sorry, Sir Adrian."

"All right then. Since you will give me no definite time I will give you one. I shall expect a full inquest not later than three days from now. I shall give your superiors all the facts and make known my wishes. That is allowing you two days to pursue what investigations remain. I think I am being very generous."

He evidently considered the interview was at an end, but I still sat in the chair.

Presently he coughed. "I'm afraid I shall have to turn you out, sergeant. I have some very urgent business to attend to."

"Very well," I said. "But first you would perhaps be kind enough to tell me where you were last Friday night, Sir Adrian?"

"Why do you want to know that?"

"Because I have a feeling that Richard Winter died on Friday night."

"I was out of town," he said. "At my place in Berkshire. I didn't return until Monday."

"Thank you," I said. "Good-morning, Sir Adrian."

I picked up my hat and left, walking through the expensive waiting room to the lift.

Perhaps Elliot was right. Perhaps Sir Adrian had written the anonymous letter?

When I got back to the office I immediately phoned McKay, who was chief of the Section to which I was attached. His voice sounded a little chilly. There was none of the usual Scots warmth about it. Apparently Sir Adrian had already spoken to him.

Very quickly I gave him the facts I possessed so far.

"Ye've verra little to go on," he said. "I think ye'd best close it up."

"But we can't be intimidated like this!" I said.

"Aye. Maybe not. All the same, ye havena got a case. I think ye should draw a nice black line under it." He paused. "Ye see, we canna delay the inquest longer than Friday."

I protested but it was no good. The inquest would be on Friday and to-day was Wednesday. That was the final word. McKay was pleasant about it, but very firm.

"Can I continue investigations?" I asked.

"Well . . . ye can find the wee body who tried to drown ye. But beyond that point ye will be acting on your own responsibility. I wouldna try stirring anything up. I wouldna be able to back ye. Understand?"

"Very good, sir."

It was depressing, especially when you were convinced you were right. Barely forty-eight hours remained to me and at the moment I had no further angles to exploit. Oh well, I thought, it will have to be an accidental death.

I spent a gloomy half hour, trying not to think of Richard Winter, but I couldn't get the damn man out of my mind. The half of him I had seen made me desperately anxious to see the other half. I cursed volubly and opened the newspaper to see where the war was, but even that failed to shut out the mental apparition of the dead actor.

Just when I thought I would recklessly buy a double Scotch, Elliot hurried in. It was unusual for him to hurry

and I thought perhaps there might be a fire in the inspector's room below.

"Hey, sarge," he said. "I did what you told me. I went down to Records and blew hell out of them. And sure enough, I got results. They've identified prints on the hat. An old lag with a list of convictions. Known affectionately as Ernie——"

"That's wonderful," I said, and I forgot all about the double Scotch.

CHAPTER SEVEN

RECORDS had sent down a typewritten slip containing Ernie's particulars. He had had five convictions, all of them for housebreaking, and his last one had been for five years. Altogether, he had spent eleven years of his life in prison, or, if you prefer it, four thousand and sixteen days. It certainly made you think.

His *modus operandi* was usually to pick a house that was unoccupied. It might be so only for a week-end or it might have been vacant for several months. Ernie discovered all these things by posing as an official of the gas company. And when it got too hot he became an official of the electric light company. Assured that the house was empty, he would break in by cutting a pane of glass. In his wake he left always this trade mark—a circular hole in a window or a door. It was funny really that he never varied his proceedings. But then criminals are superstitious.

The thing that struck Elliot and I was that Ernie had never used violence. If somebody disturbed him he vanished. That hardly squared with the man who had nearly drowned me in the lily pond. But you never can tell.

Ernie's present age was thirty-seven. His parents were unknown, but he had a wife somewhere in Whitechapel. Children, too. Records said he never went near them and that the wife charred to earn a living.

That didn't seem to be of much help in tracing him, but Elliot turned over the typewritten slip and showed me that there was an address on the other side. This was the flat of a girl with whom Ernie had "consorted"—which is the police way of saying he had slept with her. Her name was Alice,

and her activities bore no relation to the girl who had gone through the looking glass. In fact, she had once been fined forty shillings for soliciting in Brook Street.

"I know her," said Elliot triumphantly.

"I bet you do," I replied.

"Not intimately," he added. "But I pulled her in for that soliciting job. It was when I was in the uniform branch two years ago. I don't think she was really soliciting, but I was very enthusiastic in those days."

I smiled. "We'd better go and seek her out," I said. "You can do the talking. Since you squeezed her for a couple of quid there must be quite a bond between the two of you."

Elliot didn't like that at all. He protested that he only mixed in the very best circles, and that his amours were merely the result of his magnetic personality.

"Interesting," I said. "You must show me how you do it some time."

He grinned. "It's cause and effect," he said.

Well, we walked along to Alice's flat which was a stone's throw from Oxford Street. It was on the top floor up a long flight of stairs that was punctuated by two landings.

We started to climb up and when we reached the first landing we became aware that there was someone just ahead of us. A shortish man in a black trilby, carrying a brief case. We paused so that he wouldn't know we were behind.

He went on right to the top floor and then we heard a bell ringing. This was followed by a door opening and a girl's voice saying: "Why, Arthur. I didn't expect you so early!" The man Arthur mumbled something and then the door closed.

Elliot looked at me.

"We'll have to wait," he said. "Arthur is obviously a customer. Can't very well burst in in the—er—middle of things, can we?"

Despite my desire to see Arthur in his underclothes I decided Elliot was right. If we wanted Alice to talk it was no use getting entangled in her business. We sat down on the edge of the stairs at the first landing.

Time went by and Elliot at last told me the story of the sultan and his eunuchs, which I think is very funny. But then you will have heard it already.

It got to half an hour and Elliot sighed.

"Long session," he said.

"Perhaps he's selling her an insurance policy," I suggested.

Elliot shook his head. "He was a customer all right. I could tell by looking at him. I didn't spend a year on this beat for nothing."

It was an hour before Arthur re-appeared. He ambled down the stairs, carrying the same brief case. When he saw us he was a little abashed. But Elliot smiled and said it was a nice day and Arthur agreed. We waited for him to gain the street, then we continued our climb and reached Alice's door.

We rang the bell and after a lot of rustling and banging Alice showed herself.

"Good afternoon," said Elliot. "Can we come in?"

She was a nondescript creature, quite attractive in her way, but far too heavily made-up. She took one look at Elliot.

"You!" she exclaimed. "What the hell's the trouble now?"

Elliot smiled. "There is no trouble, Alice. Not as far as you're concerned anyway. We'd just like to have a chat. This is Detective-sergeant Warren."

Alice finished hooking up her dress and then let us in. She led us to a very small sitting-room which reeked of cheap scent.

She stared at Elliot. "Trying to pinch me for another forty bob," she snapped.

"Let us bury the hatchet," said Elliot. "I was only doing my duty."

"Funny sort of duty. Running in a girl for something she hadn't done!"

"I've felt badly about it ever since," replied Elliot. "Still, it's a long time ago. Have a cigarette."

"Ta." She took one.

Elliot smiled sweetly at her and I must confess that she smiled back. It was astonishing. Elliot knew just how to handle her.

"Know anyone called Ernie?" he asked casually.

"Ernie who?"

"Just Ernie."

"I might do. What do you want to know for?"

"We'd like to talk to him. Ask him how he's getting on."

"Come off it!" She grinned at Elliot. "What's he done this time. Mind you, I haven't seen him for ages. Not for ages, you understand?"

"Perfectly," said Elliot. "Well, he happens to have lost his identity card."

"That's a good one! I bet he never had one to lose."

"Oh yes, he's gone quite respectable. Made a lot of money. Surprised he hasn't been round to look you up."

Elliot's powers of perjury and invention knew no limits. He played on the girl's greed and her wounded vanity until you would have thought that Ernie had become a millionaire overnight. She admitted that she had once lent Ernie five pounds which he had never repaid. Elliot snatched at this and quickly incorporated it into his argument.

"You mean he's really made money?" she asked.

Elliot nodded. "Lots of money."

His voice carried such conviction that she believed him. She burst into an angry tirade against the unfortunate Ernie, calling him all the unprintable words in the type-setter's cemetery. She raved and ranted and Elliot gently fed the flames with a soft word here and there.

I took no part in the proceedings at all. I merely sat in a chair and tried to look sympathetic.

In the end she fumbled with her bag and produced a slip of paper on which was written a phone number.

"That's where he always told me I could get him," she said. "And when you see him you might remind the little bastard I'm still alive!"

Elliot took the paper and commiserated about the wiles of men. A girl wasn't safe to trust any one of them. No, indeed. I thought he was laying it on a bit hot, but Alice didn't think so. She heartily agreed with every sentiment that Elliot loosed, the triter the better.

She had quite forgotten that he had dunned her for forty shillings. She only knew that he was kind and understanding and she would do anything to help him. Just anything. I was fearful lest she should drag him into the bedroom there and then to prove it.

But somehow he managed to retreat and presently we were outside the door with the phone number; while inside the flat Alice was left with the memory of a policeman who had affected her like nothing since the time her first lover had seduced her on Brighton beach and whispered Ella Wheeler Wilcox in her ear.

Elliot winked at me as we descended the stairs.

"Nice work, eh, sarge?"

"It was murder," I said. "You'd better keep away from this area for some time to come."

The phone number took us down the Mile End Road where we stopped at a local police station and spoke to the inspector-in-charge. He was a jovial, round-faced individual with a tough frame and an enormous capacity for beer. I think he was glad of someone to talk to, because he talked all right. For a solid hour he talked.

Finally he got around to the phone number. He rang up the exchange, muttered a few crude pleasantries to the girl at the other end, and was quickly given the address.

"It is as I thought," he said, turning to us. "The number is Ma Kelly's dump. Ma Kelly is by way of being a bloody nuisance in this district."

"What is it?" I asked. "A pub?"

"Sort of. It's really technically speaking a club. All sorts of odd customers get there. We've tried to close the place down several times but we can't get any evidence. If we raid it nothing happens. Everything is absolutely above board by the time we arrive. I suppose somebody tips her off. You know how it is?"

"Do you call to mind this fellow Ernie at all?" I asked.

"Can't say I do. But I ain't got much memory for faces, and I don't remember names too well. I expect that's why I'm still sitting in this rat-hole. Did I tell you we have rats? Well, we have. Yes, large sods, too. Chew anything to pieces they will."

I could tell that he was rambling off on one of his circular tours again, so I cut in: "What do you think we ought to do?"

"Now, that's a problem."

"Suppose we go there and tackle Ma Kelly?"

"Useless. She sticks to her friends. Never catch her narking to the police. Tough nut, she is and no mistake."

"Well," I said. "It's absolutely essential we drag in Ernie and it's got to be to-day."

"That's the trouble," said the inspector. "If he's at Ma Kelly's ten to one he'll slip through our fingers. Course, we'd get him in the end. But it might be a matter of days." Then he suddenly stopped talking. He held up a large hand.

"Tell you what," he went on. "There is a way, but I don't know whether you'd like to take it. You see, we can't get into Ma Kelly's unless there's some reason. What's more, we'd have to advertise our presence for some time beforehand. But if there was a disturbance in the club, something like a

fight, for instance . . . That would do the trick. I could come in with several of the fellows here and we'd surround the place. Do you get me ? "

" Yes," I said. " But who starts the fight ? "

" You'd have to do that," he pointed out apologetically.

" All our people are known. It's only an idea, mind you.

But since you're in such a hurry . . . "

I looked at Elliot. " What do you think ? "

He shrugged his shoulders. " We don't know whether Ernie's in there or not."

" The only thing to do is go there and find out," said the inspector. " Only you'd have to change your clothes a bit. Or they'd be suspicious."

Elliot smiled. " Let's do that, sarge."

" Okay," I said. It was not exactly my idea of an evening out, but what would you ?

The inspector entered into the game and found us various articles of clothing more suitable to the occasion. We dressed up in these and I must confess we looked more than a little peculiar.

The inspector was enthusiastic. " That's just right. Just right. I reckon you'll pass in."

We slouched off down the street and presently we came to an alley. We dived into this and stopped in front of a side door. A naked flight of worn wooden steps led down into a basement. We hesitated for a moment and then descended. At the bottom we were challenged by a tough looking customer who adopted a very belligerent tone. However, we had our story pat, thanks to the inspector, and very soon we were passed into a large room that was filled with human beings and smoke.

At the far end was a bar counter. You could just distinguish it through the haze. Behind the bar was a fat woman. I guessed that this was Ma Kelly. She had an enormous bosom that shot out almost at right angles from her thick neck. Her nose was long and fleshy and she had quite a dozen chins. Her ears were held down by a large pair of ear-rings that swung like pendulums with every movement of her big head. Not exactly everybody's idea of his favourite grandmother, but she was certainly popular with the crowd in the club.

She gazed at us through the smoke. We ordered some

drinks and took them over to a table. A group of people were playing darts and there was a poker game in progress. We sat down and looked cautiously around us. We had a photograph of Ernie, but it was the sort of nondescript police effort that leaves a lot to the imagination.

"Nice joint," said Elliot.

It was so full that it took you time to see your way about. After about ten minutes I thought I caught a glimpse of someone who could be Ernie. I pointed him out to Elliot.

"You mean the little guy leaning forward in his seat?"

"That's right."

Elliot studied the man. "Yes, I reckon that's him. What do we do now?"

"Follow me," I said. We picked up our drinks and sauntered over to the table where Ernie was sitting. With Ernie was a fat man with loving designs tattooed on his hands. He had scarcely a hair on his head. Ernie was tired and thin. His face sagged downwards in a series of straight lines, as though somebody had tugged at it hard. His eyes were mournful. He would have made a most convincing undertaker.

I beamed at the fat man.

"Why," I said, "if it isn't Clarence!"

The fat man stared at me through his small eyes. He broke off the conversation he was having with Ernie and his hands moved back across the table.

"What did you say?" he demanded in a thick, grating voice.

"You remember me, Clarence," I said. "Don't you recognise me?"

He took umbrage in no small manner. "My name is not Clarence," he snapped. "It never has been. And if it had, then I'd have changed it."

"This is ridiculous," I said. "I'm sure you're Clarence. Have you got a lover's knot tattooed on your chest?"

"No," he roared. "I ain't got nothing tattooed on my chest. Go on, beat it!"

"But, Clarence," I began. I didn't get any further. The fat man stood up, swore and took a sock at me. I ducked and lunged out at him, catching him in the soft region of his stomach. The air left his body, like a punctured cycle tyre, and he folded up in his seat.

Meantime, Elliot was looking after Ernie.

I don't know if you have ever been in one of these affrays, but if you have you will know how quickly a fight spreads. No forest fire ever moved faster. The fat man recovered and socked at me again. Then somebody else socked at me. And a third person hit the fat man. It began to get very complicated and I kept a weather eye on Elliot who had laid out Ernie and was being assailed by two other customers who joined in for no reason at all.

Inside five minutes the place was in an uproar. People starting throwing bottles and when the bottles got broken they threw bits of glass. This rapidly produced casualties. Ma Kelly's stentorian voice failed to restore order, so she came out from behind the bar and started belabouring right and left with a chair leg. Her language was very poetic, if you understand that kind of poetry.

The inspector was evidently given the word by his scouts. There was a noise like thunder on the stairs and they poured into the club. They were very large policemen and in the middle of them was the inspector, grinning beautifully. I think he liked a rough house.

Elliot was knocked down and Ernie managed to get away to a door at the back. We chased after him, avoiding two customers who swung their fists at us. Ernie got to the door first and slammed it shut, evidently locking it from the other side. There was no doubt that he didn't wish to meet any kind of police. Elliot threw himself against the door and split the panel. He repeated the process and smashed the lock.

We flung the door open and hurried down a passage and up some steps and into the street. We caught a glimpse of Ernie's scurrying figure. We ran like hell after him and saw him disappear into a two-storey block about fifty yards ahead. We gained on him and were soon climbing the stairs of the house. People came out of doors and wanted to know what the blazes it was all about. They didn't use that language, of course, but I don't know how to spell what they actually said.

We didn't stop. Up we went until we got to the roof. Ernie was just trying to clamber to the next one. He had his feet over the edge and was preparing to jump. But he was nervous and before he could make up his mind we were on him. Elliot hauled him back from the edge and sat him down.

"Come on, Ernie," I said. "We want to talk to you."

"My name is not Ernie," he replied.

"Whatever it is we'd like to talk to you."

"I ain't done nothing!"

We pulled him from the roof and finally he decided to co-operate and walked down the stairs under his own steam. In the street we marched him off to the station. A police van was decanting various specimens from Ma Kelly's and policemen were carting them to the lock-ups. I doubt if trade had been so brisk in that area for some time.

The inspector said we could use the enquiries room to question Ernie. We pushed him in there and told him to take a seat.

"Always picking on me," he grumbled. "Never give a bloke a chance to go straight."

"Ernie," I said. "You are telling lies. That is something you never ought to tell."

He made a rather belated attempt to pretend that he was an alien of some kind, that his name wasn't Ernie, and that his childhood had been spent in Central Europe. We dealt harshly with this, pointing out that he had no papers and was liable to be shipped to the Isle of Man at once. He regarded our statement rather dubiously and then admitted that he had been born in Brixton and had been no nearer to the continent than the newsreels.

Elliot then asked him if he had lost something and Ernie enumerated a number of things he had lost in the course of his life. These included a couple of girls, a legacy, and the money on a horse that came in at a hundred to one.

"What have you done with that beautiful bowler hat of yours?" asked Elliot.

Ernie paled and his voice was sad.

"I threw it away," he said. "It was getting shabby. I had an inferiority complex in it."

Elliot made a clicking noise with his teeth.

"You know that is not true, Ernie. You had that bowler up to a few days ago."

"That's when I give it away," replied Ernie blandly.

"To whom did you give it?"

"That's my business, ain't it? No law against giving hats away." He had recovered some of his confidence.

"Very deserving case, the chap I give it to."

Of course, he was lying. His shifty little eyes were swivelling about like an anxious ferret. I started to pitch it

into him hard. I pointed out that his next conviction would take him to jail for so many years he'd probably die there. I put the fear of God into him. Finally I said: "Why did you try to drown me, Ernie?"

His face was chalk, a dirty, pasty chalk.

"What the 'ell are you talking about?"

"You were hanging around a house in Hampstead early Tuesday morning. I chased you through the grounds, caught up with you and then you tried to drown me in the lily pond."

"Me—drown you! Caw, that's a laugh! What chance would I have against a strong, healthy chap like you?"

"I over-balanced. It was easy. I know why you did it, too. You were scared of being caught. You didn't want to get another stretch. I don't blame you, Ernie. But some people might call it attempted murder."

This sank and exploded in his brain like a depth charge.

"Murder!" he shouted. "It was just self-defence!"

Elliot smiled sardonically. "So you admit it, eh? You admit you were in the garden there on Tuesday morning? All right, what were you doing?"

"I ain't admitted nothing." He tried desperately to keep up his front, but he had given himself away and he knew it. He loosened his tie and pulled at his greasy collar.

"Now, Ernie," I said. "I want to know what you were doing in that house."

"You're making a mistake, mister. Trust a rozzer to fix things. I wasn't within ten miles of Hampstead on Tuesday morning. Straight I wasn't!"

He went on for some time in this vein, denying everything and dragging himself deeper into a net of lies. For fifteen minutes he argued. His eyes were bloodshot and the sweat was standing out on his forehead. In the end he realised it was useless. He shrugged his shoulders and his chin sank into his chest.

"All right," he said. "I was there. But you can't pin anything on to me."

"Suppose you tell me about it."

"Okay. But I ain't admittin' nothin'." He demanded a glass of water and the constable who had been waiting, notebook in hand, went off and presently returned with one. He handed it to Ernie who drank noisily, rubbed his mouth, and then sat back in the chair.

"I knew that house was empty, see. I'd cased it properly

and I knew there was nobody living there. I wish to God I'd never set eyes on the place now. Still, can't do anything about that. Well, I had things set for Saturday evening. I'd found out exactly what time the copper on the beat went by there and it was dead easy opening the back windows."

"What time was this?" I asked.

"About ten or a bit before. But I never took nothing understand. You can't have me for that. There's some in it deeper'n me. I ain't carrying the can back for no one. Get me?"

"There's still the little matter of the lily pond," I reminded him and I could see Elliot grinning from ear to ear.

"That was an accident. Honest it was. Blimey, you don't really think I'd try to do in a rozzer, do yer? I'd be bats, wouldn't I? I was frightened, see. I just acted without thinking. You believe that, don't yer?"

"We'll see," I said. "Go on."

"Well . . . I got into the grounds and crept around the back." His face seemed to grow longer and longer. Vertical furrows cut his cheeks and there was fear at the back of his eyes. "I was very careful. I knew the window I was after. But when I got there it was locked. I couldn't underst and it. I was sure the place was empty. I was in two minds. One side of me wanted to blow off out of it. The other side said it was a pity to've wasted all that time and then get nothin' for me trouble." He paused. "I wish I'd 'opped it now. Wouldn't have landed me in this mess. You can only charge me with intent though, can't you?"

"Never mind about that. Keep going."

"All right, all right. I was only askin'. You coppers think you own the bleedin' earth. You do, straight. I think I ought to have a little consideration for telling you this. I don't have to talk. . . ."

"No," I said. "You don't have to. You could face a lot of fancy charges instead."

"But I didn't knock off a thing. I was out of pocket—what with bus fares and that!"

I suggested sarcastically that he should put it down as business expenses. "Now, what happened after you discovered the window was locked?"

"I walked around for a bit and then I noticed that a window on the first floor was open. Small window. I guessed it was a lavatory or a bathroom. I'm not one of

these acrobatic blokes, but I reckoned I could shin up the drain-pipe and reach the window without too much trouble. Well, that's what I did and I ripped me trousers doin' it. Finally I scrambled through the window which was a blasted sight smaller than it appeared. I found meself on a bathroom floor. All tiled and cold it was. Still it seemed that everything was all right and I struck a match to get me bearings. What I saw there give me a proper turn."

"What was it?" I asked.

He wasn't very anxious to continue. He had a coughing fit, swallowed some more water and then rubbed his hand across his knee. "You've got to believe what I'm going to tell you, mister. You rozzers know me well enough by now

"Come on!" I snapped.

"Well . . . there was a bloke lying in the bath starin' at me. I was scared stiff. I'd been copped out and no mistake. I'd felt certain that there was nobody living in the place. My headpiece ticked over fast. I knew I couldn't get down the drain-pipe fast enough to escape. I decided to stay and pitch a yarn. I started talking, telling the bloke I was sorry I had intruded on his bathing but that I was working for the telephone company and there was some trouble with the wires and I was trying to trace it."

"My God," I said. "I bet you didn't get away with that."

"The bloke didn't move," he went on. "Didn't bat an eyelid. Just stuck there in the bath."

"Was his head above the water?"

"I don't know," he said. "I suppose it must have been. Anyway, I soon realised that he was dead. I'd heard of coves popping off in baths, but I'd never seen one before. I didn't stay to look long, I can tell you. I wasn't stickin' around with no stiffs. I struggled through the window again and shinned down to the garden. Then I beat it, fast as I could go."

"That's beautiful," I said. "And now, why in the hell did you come back to the place on Tuesday morning?"

"I'd left something behind," he said quickly.

"What?"

"A wallet containing my identity card and all. Must have slipped out of my pocket as I was leaving."

I stared at him twice. Yes, he really did expect me to

believe it. In fact, he was rather proud of his story. Some of the lines in his face had softened.

"How much will I get for intent?" he asked.

"Just a moment." I stood up and paced the room, while the constable bit his pencil and Elliot twiddled some string round his fingers making a slip knot. "It won't work, Ernie. That story's as phoney as blazes. I'll believe it as far as the time when you found the man in the bath. Suppose you start telling it to me again from there and make it the truth this trip."

Elliot smiled. Ernie was a mass of righteous indignation and the constable seemed bored. At the back of the station in the cells one of Ma Kelly's customers was shouting all the obscene words he could think of and suggesting that the jailer had been born out of wedlock.

"I told you the truth," Ernie said. "Not my fault if you don't believe it!"

I peered down into his grey face. "We think the man in the bath may have been murdered. He was struck on the head and fell into the water. You say that you found him like that, but that's only your story. You've no proof to back it up. It could be that when you went into the bathroom he saw you and it could also be that you hit him on the head to keep him quiet!"

"No!" The word was spoken in a throaty whisper. "No! That's a lie!"

"It stands up better than your version," I said. "In fact, it could be made to stand up pretty well."

"I ain't never used violence!"

"You gave a very good imitation of it when you pushed me into the pond," I said.

"I never hit that bloke," he shouted. "I didn't! Straight I didn't! I wasn't near enough to him!"

"They all say that," interposed Elliot.

Ernie passed his hand over his forehead, while Elliot and I contrived to look very grim.

"Just suppose," said Ernie presently. "Just suppose you're right. Mind, I'm admitting nothing. But suppose you are right and I haven't told you all of it. What do I get if I spill the rest?"

"Nothing," I replied. "You might get yourself out of the way of a murder or manslaughter charge. That's all."

Ernie cogitated. The murder business upset him more

than a little. He wanted to get shot of it as quickly as possible and yet something was holding him back. What that was I couldn't guess.

A few moments later he seemed to come to a conclusion. His eyes remained shifty but some of the chalk went out of his face.

"You going to tell us?" I asked.

"Ain't no choice, is there?" He paused. "Only I would like you to realise that I was forced into this thing. If I'd had my way I'd have scarpered the second I saw the stiff."

"Your second name is Fauntleroy," I said. "Come on, Ernie. I can't give you much longer."

"All right . . . Well, it was like I said. I come upon the bloke in the bath and my first thought was to disappear as fast as I could. I was just making for the window when the bathroom door opened and the light was turned on. An oldish gent with grey hair stood in the doorway. He demanded to know what the hell I was doing there. I said I was trying to revive the bloke in the bath . . . Well, that shook him all right and he dropped his belligerent tone. After a couple of minutes I told him I was going and he had better call the police."

"Did he say anything about the man in the bath?" I asked.

"Not much. Said there'd been an accident . . . But he didn't want to call the police. I could tell that. Eventually I understood why. There were some people downstairs with him and he explained that it was a delicate situation. Didn't want any scandal like. He'd much prefer it if the body was found when he wasn't on the premises. And he suggested that I might feel the same way about it."

I smiled. "Every man has his price. What was yours, Ernie?"

"I never said nothing about money."

"I did though."

"Well, there was a little sum suggested, but that was as far as things got."

"I can imagine," I said. "It was a pity the body was discovered before the appointed time. It meant that when you arrived to collect your little sum, as you so nicely put it, the police were in possession. That was why you blundered into the house on Tuesday morning, wasn't it?"

"I haven't said so."

"Your silence was sufficiently eloquent. Now, who was this man. Did he tell you his name?"

"Not likely."

I nodded. "I should have been surprised if he had. You know, it was exceedingly foolish of you to come to the house when it was already occupied by the police."

"Blimey, you don't think I'd have come if I'd known you was there, do you? When I heard voices in that room with the french windows I felt sure it was the gent I'd seen before."

"How much money were you going to get?"

"I'm not answering that."

"Very well. How were you going to pick it up?"

"He said it would be left in the desk in that room."

The more I heard of it the more I admired Sir Adrian, for he it was—quite obviously—who had done the deal with Ernie. Sir Adrian, cool and calm in the face of any emergency. A man who made lightning decisions, who weighed people with ruthless cynicism. A gambler who was not afraid of the stakes. Quite remarkable, in fact.

"Tell me," I continued. "Did you see any of the others who were with this man on Saturday?"

"I did get a dekko. Seemed to be a woman and another bloke."

"Could you describe the woman at all?"

"Well, her hair was done in a fringe and she was wearing a sort of black overcoat. Dark, she was."

Mrs. Christine Winter without a doubt.

"And the man?"

"I didn't really see him properly."

At last something was moving. Winter's actions still remained puzzling, but to involve Sir Adrian and Christine in one swoop was not a bad evening's work. I believed most of Ernie's story. He was not clever enough to lie consistently.

What exactly did it mean?

Winter had been dead before midnight on Saturday. That was all you could deduce for certain. But there were many other things that promised to be intriguing. I was going to enjoy talking to Sir Adrian now. I could put on the screws in a way that would solve my wounded vanity.

I turned to Ernie.

"There's nothing else you can tell me?"

"No."

I beckoned to the constable. "He can go back to his cell," I said.

Ernie stood in front of me. "You believe what I told you, don't you?"

"Perhaps, Ernie. We'll see. It still might be the way I said at first. You might have hit him over the head to get loose."

Ernie gave a nervous snort. "Blimey, do I look the sort of bloke who would murder somebody?"

"I wouldn't bring that up, if I were you," I said. "I got a deep insight into your character when we were in the lily pond."

I sent Elliot off to check up on Sir Adrian's movements as much as possible without arousing the great man's suspicions. Elliot grumbled that we were working night and day on the case and he personally didn't see why we should. Apparently he had a date with the understudy—the girl he'd been talking to in the green room at the Regent Theatre. And he didn't like work when it got between him and his dates.

We compromised by fixing a definite time for him to come off duty. What he hadn't discovered by then could wait.

"And I hope you realise," I said, "that we may be jeopardising the whole case for the sake of your boudoir expedition."

He grinned. "You haven't any romance, sarge, that's your trouble."

I left him and got a cab home.

Winter still eluded me. I wondered whether he would continue to elude me if I solved the case and found out how he had died. At the moment he seemed rather like someone walking through a forest. Occasionally you caught glimpses of him. Then he would disappear behind a solid wall of trees and come into view again at another point. You got no consecutive picture at all.

He had been famous. And the spurs to fame are usually money, power, or vanity. None of them fitted where he was concerned. He was vain, yes. He liked money, too. And he probably got a big kick from his power to sway audiences. But when you admitted those things you were no nearer the truth. None of them could account for the path he had taken. Or was I wrong?

The cab swirled round Soho Square and came to rest, its tyres scraping the curb.

The first person I saw when I got into the flat was Stuart. He was making free with my very limited quota of booze, and entertaining John by pretending to be a train. Anna appeared to be encouraging him in both activities.

Then I glanced over the other end of the room and saw with a start that Ben was sitting there, a self-consciously clean Ben in a white collar and a blue suit.

Stuart got up from the floor, drained his glass, and walked towards me.

"You work very late for your small salary," he said.

"Yes," I said. "Just a tool of the capitalists', that's me."

"We've got some news for you," he added.

"Don't tell me you've solved the case."

He ignored the sarcasm. "Doris has disappeared."

I looked at Ben. He nodded. "That's right, mister. Cleared out in the night, I should think. She ain't never done a thing like that before."

"Oh, she'll come back," I told him.

"Not her. She's took 'er clothes and everythin'. Must 'ave done it secretly. I tell yer, I don't like the look of it at all."

"Ben's afraid something may have happened to her," said Stuart.

CHAPTER EIGHT

BEN told his story. It was really very simple. He had gone out that afternoon after the pub closed, leaving Doris reading a book. She had said she might look in at the local cinema, but in any case, she would be back to open up at the usual time.

"When I returned there was a crowd of customers bangin' on the doors and shoutin'. Yer see, it was long past opening, and they was more than a bit restive. Well, I let 'em in, served 'em and then went out the back to look for Doris. I reckoned she'd probably stayed later than she intended at the pictures. I waited for an hour and then Mr. Jennings here come in and I told 'im what had happened. We searched

through 'er room and discovered that she had took all her clothes an' everything.

"I can tell yer, I was never more surpris'd in me whole life. I made enquiries around and one of the women across the road had seen Doris come out with suitcases and get into a taxi that was waitin' for her."

Anna got up and said it was time John was put to bed, particularly as she intended giving him a bath. Stuart insisted on helping her. He said he was crazy over kids, and he certainly appeared to have won John's approval. It was a kind of cortege that departed for the bathroom, with John very delighted at all the attention he was attracting and Stuart still pretending to be a railway engine.

We waited until they had gone.

"Nice lookin' little chap," said Ben. "Fair caution, too, ain't he?"

"He likes being spoilt," I said.

The bathroom door slammed and you could hear the noise of taps being/turned on. Ben's face suddenly grew serious again and his thoughts switched back to Doris.

"What do you make of it, mister?"

I shrugged my shoulders. "Difficult to say. Has she ever gone away like this before?"

"Never. Not since she come to me first of all. Little nipper of five she was then. Up to all kinds of devilment. No, she ain't never left me except to go to her aunt's in the country about once a year for a holiday. But then, I knew all about it, and she usually fixed things days ahead."

"Had she a boy friend?"

"Not that I know of. 'Course, she used to 'ave flutters now and then with some of the actors who come in. Liked actors she did. But lately she don't seem to have taken much interest in anything but those magazines she buys and going to the pictures. Lots of young chaps 'ave tried to get her, naturally. They wouldn't be human if they hadn't. But they never got far with 'er. Bored 'er they did. Yer see, the way she was brought up in the pub rather spoiled 'er for ordinary chaps. I mean, in those days we used to 'ave all the celebrities coming in and out, and Doris was quite a favourite. She's good looking now, but you ought to've seen her as a kid. She was a picture and no mistake."

I could imagine it all right. Doris must have fallen very early in her life, seduced by the soft words of some juvenile

lead. And after that there had probably been a succession of men. She was obviously not a passionate creature, despite her provocative appearance, but if the use of sex captivated a fascinating actor for her then she wouldn't hesitate to take the plunge.

An actor was always larger than life, filled with sincere insincerity, a trader in charms and mannerisms both on and off the stage; and Doris would find in him the nearest approach to the characters in the romantic fiction that she so eagerly devoured. His professional love-making would mean more to her than the stumbling avowals of some youth who literally worshipped the ground on which she trod. Those who kneel at the feet of an idol are apt to be clumsy and incoherent.

I turned to Ben.

"But surely there must have been times when she was away for a night, say. When she was out with some friend and didn't return?"

He shook his head.

"I know it sounds strange, but it never 'appened."

"And there was no hint of where she might have gone? She left nothing behind?"

"No."

I gazed at the battered face, the bloodshot eyes and the greasy head. Was he telling the truth? Or was it just another cul-de-sac of the impenetrable maze that surrounded Winter's passing?

"All right, Ben," I said. "We'll see if we can find her. We shall need her at the inquest in any case."

"Inquest? Yer mean—Dickie Winter?"

"Yes. Need you, too."

"When will that be?"

"Friday," I said. "You won't have to do anything much. Only tell the coroner a bit of what you've told me."

"Right, guv'nor." He picked up his hat and eased himself out of the chair. "Oh, by the way, I nearly forgot. When I was searching through Doris' room I found this." He exhibited a brief case which had been hidden round the corner of the chair. He handed it to me. The case was old and battered. I tried to open it and found it was locked. Inscribed on the outside were the initials "R.W."

"Must 'ave belonged ter Dickie Winter," said Ben.

"Thought I'd better bring it along. He probably left it at my place some time and forgot it. Always doing things like that, he was."

I examined the lock and then forced it with a penknife. Inside I found several playscripts. About half a dozen. Four of them were copies of plays Winter had produced in the past, and the other two had titles I couldn't call to mind. I thought they were perhaps unproduced efforts that had been submitted for his consideration.

Ben was looking over my shoulder. "Wot's the name of the author?" he asked.

I glanced at the scripts. "Thelma Kingston."

"Oh, I remember them. Caw, lumme, yes. Somebody asked him to read them. An' you ought to've 'eard what he said. I reckon that woman would 'ave died of shock if she knew the language he used to describe 'er plays."

"You don't know her?"

"Naw."

"Okay, Ben, thanks. And I'll let you know the moment I hear anything of Doris."

"I 'ope nothin' 'as happened to her. She's a good girl. Useful in the bar, too. Almost look on her as my own daughter, if yer get what I mean."

He shuffled off into the night, heading for Charing Cross Road where he would get a bus to take him home.

I was flipping through the pages of the two scripts when Stuart reappeared. John had duly had his bath and was now being tucked up for the night.

"It would be good to be a child again once in a while," said Stuart, as he sat down. "Lot of the fun goes out of life when you grow up." There was a wistful, nostalgic expression in his cynical face. His eyes were softer than I had ever seen them before.

"You ought to get a job in a day nursery," I said.

His glance fell on the brief case.

"Oh, so you've opened it? Anything much?"

"No. Just a few scripts, that's all." I offered him a cigarette. "Ever heard of anyone called Thelma Kingston?"

His face set hard for a moment, as though the name had rung a bell somewhere. Then he relaxed. "No, never. Thelma Kingston, eh? What is she—a budding playwright?"

"Possibly. There's two scripts of hers here." I watched

Stuart carefully, but he betrayed nothing. Yet that first look had told me he knew something. I decided Thelma Kingston should be investigated.

Stuart slowly blew smoke down his nostrils.

"Well," he said. "How does Doris' disappearance fit into your theories?"

"It doesn't—not at the moment."

He laughed. "I knew you were on the wrong track. Can't you see it's the climax to the whole affair?"

"Suppose you tell me," I said.

"Not on your life. Why, I'd be losing five pounds, wouldn't I? Besides, I don't think you'll ever get more than a verdict of accidental death."

"I might if you helped me."

He smiled. "You seem to forget that I'm writing that biography."

"Have you seen Christine?"

"Yes. . . . She was charming. She is giving me every facility."

"Did you tell her it wouldn't be a pleasant book?"

"What the hell do you mean?"

I went and got a cigarette from the box on the table. "You can't kid me," I said. "If you write a book on Winter you'll want to destroy the idol, expose the feet of clay. You'll strip him bare with malicious prose."

That amused him. "I certainly shan't do any white-washing, but then I don't think one should in biographies of famous men, do you? I shall endeavour to present a true picture of Richard Winter."

"A true picture." I laughed. "That's something you could never do. You'll present a biased portrait, but that's as far as you'll get."

He shrugged his shoulders. "I'm not going to argue or I'd be here all night. When it is complete you shall have a copy. . . . Incidentally, I intend to devote a couple of chapters to his death. If there wasn't a law of libel I might even hint at the person who killed him."

"Interesting," I said. "Of course, we may have found that out by the time the book is published."

"I doubt it."

His eyes twinkled with mirth. "Matter of fact," he went on, "I know already who killed Winter." He paused. "I knew it yesterday. . . . Well, I must be going, my dear

chap. Say good-night to your wife for me, will you? And don't drive your brain too hard."

With a wave of his hand he was gone.

Presently Anna arrived. She wanted to know what had happened to Stuart and I told her. Then she explained that she had had a job to get John settled. "He kept on wanting to play with that toy dog Stuart brought him."

I stared at her. "Stuart did what?"

"Brought him a toy dog."

"Remarkable," I said.

"I don't see why."

"You don't know Stuart."

Her forehead wrinkled. "I think he's rather charming. He's got such a nice smile." She patted a cushion and placed it behind her back. "I've rather fallen for him," she added.

"Oh, you have."

"He's so intelligent, too. Did you know that when Noel Coward was poor he shared a room with Stuart?"

I nodded. "I think it must have been a house, because Emlyn Williams, John Gielgud, Robert Donat, and Dodie Smith were there as well."

"Now you're just being horrid." She fumbled for her library book which was in the rack near the wall. "He asked me to go to that new film at the Empire with him."

"How nice," I said sarcastically.

"Oh, I didn't make a date. I said you would probably be taking me yourself, darling."

This was an example of her famous indirect approach. She never believed in a frontal assault; it was always a flank attack. The results were invariably devastating as far as I was concerned.

"I've never mentioned the picture," I said, trying to make some show of resistance.

"No, dear, but then, you've been very busy, haven't you?"

I thought up all manner of withering retorts, but I never voiced them. I knew I was beaten. So, having opened my mouth and shut it again, I said that as she wanted to go to the film we would go on Friday after the inquest.

She smiled sweetly. "I'll tell Miss Pain. She can come in and look after John." Then she delved into her book and was silent.

I relaxed in my chair and tried to blow smoke rings.

After ten minutes of failure in this direction I went to the phone and rang up Sir Adrian. A smooth-spoken servant answered. Sir Adrian was out and no one, it seemed, knew where he was. I put down the receiver and dialled Christine's number. I heard it ringing, but there was no reply.

I had been attempting to think up a plan of action that would get the most out of Ernie's confession. It wasn't easy. People like Sir Adrian knew all the answers. You couldn't force them into anything by mere cross-examination. And Ernie's doubtful character was not the best of passports to a jury's confidence.

With the inquest on Friday I had a bare thirty hours in which to produce results. It was a very irritating situation.

Half an hour later, Anna looked up from her book.

"Would you be a dear and make some sandwiches and coffee. I'm in the middle of a most exciting chapter."

"I happen to be trying to solve a murder," I replied tartly.

"You're not still worrying about Richard Winter, darling."

"I'm afraid I am."

"Oh, but Stuart says it was an accident. He told me about it and I think he's right."

"So Stuart said it was an accident, did he?"

"Yes." She put her book on her lap. "He explained his theory to me."

"How nice of him!"

She ignored the sarcasm and returned to her book. The situation of the sandwiches and the coffee reached a deadlock and it seemed likely that I would have to give way again. But the ringing of the telephone saved me, like the gong rescuing a punch-drunk heavyweight.

I rushed towards it and lifted the receiver. It was Elliot.

"Is that you, sarge?"

I said it was. "Did you have a nice time with you blonde?"

He coughed in an embarrassed fashion. "Matter of fact she must have given me the wrong number of her flat. I walked in on an aged spinster with two cats and an ear-trumpet."

"Something must have gone wrong with your system," I said.

"Perhaps," he admitted. "Still, she probably wasn't much good."

"Somebody once said that all women were the same in the dark."

"There's a lot in that," he admitted.

There was a pause. The line was crackling and spluttering.

"Well," I said, "you didn't ring me up just to tell me that sad story, or did you?"

"No, sarge. But you see, I didn't have anything to do. So I've been working on the case. I've checked on Sir Adrian's movements. I'm at a restaurant off the Strand at the moment. He's here—in the next alcove."

"He is!" I said excitedly.

"He's got Mrs. Winter with him and he's trying the heavy romantic stuff."

"I can't believe it."

"But it's true, sarge. He's holding her hand and talking in whispers to her. And she's growing all coy and fencing him off. It's very educational."

"Well," I said, "that's something I didn't expect."

"I haven't been able to get all they're talking about, but I've gathered they intend to go to the Hampstead house very shortly. I thought you'd like to be in on it. . . . Just a minute, sarge." He went away from the phone and presently returned. "They've just left," he said. "Shall I see you here?"

"Okay," I said. "I'll be along as soon as I can get a cab."

I glanced at the clock. Ten-thirty. A little late for Sir Adrian and Christine to visit the house. More than a little late, in fact.

I put back the receiver and found my hat.

"I won't be able to stay for sandwiches, darling." I kissed Anna on the forehead. "So you can have yours when you like."

She gave me a baleful look. "Will you be sleeping here, to-night?"

"Possibly," I said. "But don't wait up for me."

I left the room, knowing that for once I had scored a point.

I arrived at Hampstead about fifteen minutes later. The gaunt Winter edifice was cloaked in darkness, and it wasn't until I reached the steps up to the front door that I saw Elliot. He was standing by the french windows that led into the Louis XIV drawing room.

"You've been quick," he said. "Sir Adrian and Mrs. Winter are in there. Seem to be sorting out books, pulling 'em out of the shelves and putting 'em back again."

By slightly opening the french windows it was possible to hear the conversation inside. Eavesdropping is not the pleasantest of occupations, but in police work there is sometimes no choice.

Sir Adrian seemed to be searching for something, flicking through the pages of the books. Christine, looking very smart in a fox fur, was leaning back in one of the chairs watching him.

The night air was causing the curtains to flutter, so I had to close the windows until they were open barely half an inch.

"I don't understand your attitude," Sir Adrian was saying. "You told me once that if it wasn't for Richard you would marry me."

"I know," she replied.

"You never loved him," he went on.

"Perhaps not."

"You merely loved the thing he stood for." There was a silence, broken by the noise of book pages being flicked. "Oh, Chris, I've waited a long time. . . . Now that Richard's gone there's nothing to stop us."

"People would talk." Her voice was dry, unemotional.

"Does that matter? Everyone knows the dance he's led you."

"It isn't that, dear. It's Richard's reputation. The name he made in the theatre. When I married him I vowed that no matter what he did or what happened I would guard that name."

"And for that you put up with a drunkard. A man who swore at you. A man who sometimes never shaved or washed for days on end, who was habitually unfaithful to you. He was sarcastic about all your efforts to look after him. He made bawdy jokes about his sex life with you. My dear, you've done everything any woman could be expected to do. Now it's your turn to have some of the pleasures of life. I'm busy now with the war on. But it won't last for ever. When it's over we can go away." There was an urgency in his voice, a warmth of desire that was alien to the mask of the man of affairs that he presented to the world. He was pleading like ten million lovers had done before him, using the time-worn phrases, the old arguments, infusing them with that optimism

which passion evokes. Yet the ghost of Richard Winter was sniping sardonically at his ardour. The ghost that haunted Christine, that probably would always dominate her life.

"I know all that," she said slowly. "But there was the other side of him. When he was on the stage he was quite different. He was a genius then. He had power and kindness, magnificence and grandeur. Do you realise that there are people who will treasure the memory of a performance of his as one of those rare experiences of life. For their sake his reputation must not be smirched. I hated most of those years I spent with Richard. Yet all the unpleasantness, all the humiliation was more than balanced by the excitement of seeing him sway an audience on a first night. . . . If only he hadn't died in such a sordid manner! When I saw him lying in the bath it was a terrible shock. I knew that those police would see him like that, would laugh and make vulgar jokes. The newspapers would hear about it, would probe until they got at the truth. Then it would reach the ears of the public who would forget in one moment the inspiration with which Richard had filled them. They would take a malicious delight in dissecting him. That has been the way with all men of genius. I knew that I had to protect Richard, not just the man he was, but the brilliant flame that burned on the stage. . . . I was horribly frightened, especially when that dreadful detective started poking his nose into things, making out that it wasn't an accident. . . . I suppose there won't be any trouble over that?"

"No." Sir Adrian sounded tired, disheartened. "I got through to the Home Office. The inquest will be held on Friday. And the funeral on Saturday. The detective's only a young, over-enthusiastic fellow. I can handle him all right."

Elliot stirred beside me. "That's you, sarge," he whispered.

I nodded. The scene intrigued me so much I wasn't even annoyed at Sir Adrian's unflattering evaluation of me. To him I was merely a very small cog in a very large machine.

Presently Sir Adrian was talking again.

"Chris," he said. "You can't spend the rest of your life guarding his reputation. Why, you'd be like a nun, only much worse. Surely you must see that. He's gone. And you are still alive. He cheated us out of six years. You can't want him to go on cheating us."

"Oh," she said, "it's so difficult. Let's wait a few months, dear. Things will have settled a little then. I shall know my own mind better."

"Very well. But you will let me go on seeing you?"

"Of course. Only we must be discreet. . . . Have you found it?" She was evidently referring to whatever Sir Adrian was looking for.

"No. Never mind. Don't worry. I'll see to things to-morrow."

"But it would be awful if it got out!" Her voice was hysterical. "Think of the publicity!"

"It shan't get out, Chris. I promise you that. Now, you go back to the flat and have some sleep. Heaven knows you need it. You can safely leave the whole business to me."

"Darling," she said. "You're being terribly kind. But then, you always have been. Still, I wish you didn't resent Richard so. I wish you could see him in a true light."

"Let's not argue about that. . . . Now you go on, dear. You need rest."

"All right." There was a pause during which I imagined they probably kissed. Then: "Good-night, darling."

"Good-night, Chris. Get some sleep, won't you?"

"I will."

The soft thump of her high heels on the carpet. Then the louder tap on the floor of the hall. She emerged, the light from her torch stabbing the black-out. Carefully she picked her way down the steps and walked along the path to the road. I saw, for the first time, that a taxi was pulled in to the curb a little farther down. She reached it and in a moment it drove away, the gears grinding with that abdominal anguish that seems to afflict all London cabs.

"You wait here," I said to Elliot. "I'm going to talk to Sir Adrian. Listen to everything that's said because you may have to swear to some of it."

"Righto, sarge."

I crossed the grass and climbed the steps, letting myself into the house. The atmosphere was fusty and there was no noise save the inexorable ticking of that grandfather clock.

The heavy curtains of the drawing-room had been drawn. The Louis XIV furniture did not seem so out of place in the artificial light. It even achieved a certain warmth which was denied it in the harsh flood of day.

Seated at the Boulle desk was Sir Adrian. He wore a

thick overcoat and he had a scarf twined round his neck. There was a sad expression on his face, an off-guard look that would have surprised the many who saw him only in his official capacity.

He gave a slight start as I entered.

"Oh, good-evening, sergeant." His hands strayed nervously along the edges of the book in front of him. It was one of the Balzac.

"Clearing up?" I sat lightly on the settee.

"Yes." His manner lacked the usual arrogance. "I am so busy nowadays I have no time in the day to spare at all."

I waited for ten seconds, wondering what was the best line of approach.

"Will all this be sold up?"

"Possibly."

"It must be worth a lot of money," I said.

"Yes. . . . But I'm sure you didn't come at this hour to discuss the value of furniture, sergeant."

That was a jolt. "No," I said. "I've been wanting to see you, Sir Adrian. Some other evidence has cropped up which I would like to talk to you about."

"Well?"

"I seem to remember that you told me you hadn't been in this house for some time?"

"That's right. The morning Richard was discovered was the first visit for two months." His voice was hard, the words bitten off, determined.

"Just so," I said. I inhaled some smoke and then continued. "You're quite sure of that, sir?"

He gazed at me with a lift of his brows. You could almost hear the danger signal clanging in his brain. "Of course, I'm sure."

"The evidence that has come up suggests that Richard Winter died prior to ten o'clock Saturday night."

"Really?"

"I think you were in this house at that time, Sir Adrian."

"Are you accusing me of telling a deliberate lie?"

I nodded. "You probably have a very good reason for it. But at ten o'clock Saturday night you were here. So were Mrs. Winter and Richard Winter's understudy, Gerald Carson."

His lips stretched in a taut line. "You seem determined

to pursue this wild-goose chase, young man. You can't still believe that Richard may have been murdered?"

"I am merely trying to expel all reasonable doubts from my mind."

"You would do better to let the matter rest. All the facts fit in with the death having been an accident."

"Not all of them, Sir Adrian. However, that is beside the point. Will you tell me exactly what happened here on Saturday night?"

"This thing is becoming an insane farce! I won't be a party to any more examination. You understand?"

I leaned forward. "According to the doctor Richard Winter's death could have occurred any time between four o'clock on Friday and about ten o'clock Saturday night. To put it more precisely it could have taken place while you are alleged to have been in this house, Sir Adrian."

He stood up. "I demand to know the nature of this evidence."

"I'll tell you," I said. "For some reason which you doubtless will know, you and Mrs. Winter and Gerald Carson came to this house on Saturday night. While you were here a man broke in through the bathroom window with intent to steal. He found Richard Winter in the bath—dead. Before he was able to leave I understand that you came into the room and that you bribed him to remain silent about the whole affair——"

"This is preposterous!"

"Let me finish, Sir Adrian. All this is merely allegation. I am not stating it as fact. We have arrested this man and he has confessed to the episode. He also says that he returned here on Tuesday morning to collect a certain sum of money which you had promised him. Whether that is true or not does not affect the issue. What is important is that you and Mrs. Winter and Gerald Carson were here in this house while Richard Winter lay dead in his bath and that you, at least, knew of his presence in the bath."

"I deny it!" he snapped.

"That isn't wise, Sir Adrian. I'm trying hard to handle this case with tact. I may seem heavy-fisted to you, but I'm doing my best. I don't want to cause more trouble than is necessary. I merely wish to satisfy myself as to the cause of your brother's death. If you make this difficult for me I shall have no choice but to record these facts at the inquest."

For a moment I thought he intended to go on fighting, but I misjudged him. He was clever enough to know exactly when to change his course. He did so now, without the slightest embarrassment.

"I must confess you have a deal of spirit. I admire spirit." He smiled ingratiatingly. "All right, I'll tell you. But it's strictly off the record. I shall sign no statement."

"Very well, sir."

He still fumbled with the Balzac novel as though there were some sinister significance attached to it. "I think I told you something of the relationship existing between myself and my brother and you will have seen for yourself a little of the type of man he was. He despised me, you know. And I despised him. I have had to work hard for the progress I have made in life. Whereas Richard has floated along in a carefree, Bohemian fashion. Things just fell into his lap. For as far back as I can remember it has been like that. I had to plod with my studies at school. He could always find someone from whom he could crib. He had no sense of responsibility and was utterly unstable and yet he was extremely popular. He never failed to get his own way." He glanced down at the desk. I wondered if he was thinking of Christine when he said that. His voice was bitter.

"Richard," he went on, "had life handed to him on a platter. And of later years, as I told you, he grew to be a source of great worry to me. One escapade followed another. I had no sooner pulled him out of one than he was in the next. Consequently, I lived in apprehension of what he might do to-day or to-morrow or the following year.

"I had heard he was going into this play and I was filled with misgivings. I knew what he was like in that theatrical atmosphere. It had the worst possible influence on him. On the Friday I was told that he was too drunk to rehearse and then, later, that he was nowhere to be found. I began to imagine all sorts of terrible things. My political position is not as secure as it might be and I dare not let any scandal affect it in any way.

"Well, at Saturday lunch-time I had a telegram from Richard asking me to meet him at nine o'clock that evening at this house."

I interrupted him. "Have you still got that telegram, sir?"

"Yes. It is in my office. You may see it if you wish. It

just said: 'Meet me at the house to-night nine-thirty. Urgent.' I came here very punctually. I remember that the clock in the hall was striking the half after the hour. I was surprised to find Mrs. Christine Winter also here and Gerald Carson. Apparently they had both received telegrams which were worded identically with mine. We were all perturbed and hazarding guesses as to what it might be about.

"We waited for some twenty minutes and Richard did not appear."

I stopped him. "Who arrived first?"

"Er—I think Mrs. Winter was the first to come here. Then Gerald Carson. Then myself."

"Right," I said. "Go on, sir."

"At about ten minutes to ten, there was a noise at the top of the stairs and we were surprised to see Richard standing there. He was swaying heavily and his eyes were bleary, his clothes crumpled. 'I'm glad to see that you're all here,' he said, in his sarcastic fashion. 'Well, you can wait until I've had a bath.' Then he disappeared along the corridor and I heard the bath water running."

"Just one moment, sir," I said. "Didn't it strike you as strange that he should be having a bath?"

"Well—no. Not particularly."

"But the gas had been cut off. The water was ice cold."

"I see. . . . I didn't know that at the time. And if Mrs. Winter knew she evidently didn't think of it. She was upset at his condition. She had worked so hard to reform him. She wanted to go up and talk to him but we persuaded her to stay down here with us. Time went by and at the end of half an hour I was getting profoundly annoyed. I felt sure Richard was doing it on purpose. I thought I would go up and see if I could reason with him. I took Gerald Carson with me and we went and knocked on the bathroom door. We got no reply. We stood there for a minute. Then I heard a faint noise, as though someone was leaning against the bathroom window. I rattled the door handle and was surprised to find that the door was unlocked. I went in and switched on the light."

"You mean," I said, "that there was no light on in the bathroom?"

"Yes, it seemed very odd. But then Richard was very, very drunk. . . . I was astonished to see Richard in the bath, his face an ugly colour, while crouching on the floor was

a person I had never seen before. You will know more about that person than I can tell you. He was very frightened when he saw me because Richard was quite dead and he evidently knew it. I realised that if I brought a charge against him, there would be some very nasty publicity. Besides which, I did not want Richard's body to be found while Mrs. Winter was in the house. It would lead to a lot of awkward explanations and I felt she might be spared that. So I told this man to get out of the house and not to say a word of what he had seen or I would see that he got sentenced to jail. Then I went down and told Christine and Gerald Carson what had happened. I wouldn't let Christine come up to Richard. I said that we must get away from the house as quickly as possible. Then we could arrange for the body to be discovered in less embarrassing circumstances. It was so obviously an accident. Christine told me that the same thing had nearly occurred on an American tour in a hotel bathroom.

"So we left the house and returned to our respective homes. I went part of the way with Mrs. Winter to console her. You see, she was genuinely fond of Richard, despite the hideous way in which he treated her and his death in such an ignominious manner was a deep shock to her. . . . Well, I think that's all. I make no excuse for failing to tell you this before. My reasons are obvious. But I'm afraid it does little more than make the accident verdict the only possible solution."

I lit another cigarette and thought over the story. It seemed to fit all right. I looked at Sir Adrian.

"It would have been impossible for one of you to have gone up to the bathroom without the other two knowing?" I asked.

"It would indeed. We were all here when Richard appeared at the top of the stairs, prior to going into the bathroom. None of us moved until I decided to go and hurry him up. I took Gerald Carson with me and we left Mrs. Winter down here."

The case was wrapped up. It only needed the coroner to put some string on it and it could be docketed away. Still I was not convinced.

"You understand, sergeant," Sir Adrian was saying, "that this interview does not constitute a statement or an admission of any kind. I can contradict it at the inquest if I so desire."

"Yes. I understand. . . . Tell me, did you ever find out what it was Richard Winter wanted to see you all about? I mean—it was surely something important?"

Sir Adrian shook his head. "I never found out. It may have been just a practical joke. Richard had rather the mentality of the small boy who goes round ringing doorbells." He was cold and precise. You could almost feel the hatred he bore the dead man. It oozed and gushed from every word he spoke.

But why had he not told me this story before? Because of Mrs. Winter and the scandal. That was his explanation. And it would suffice for an English jury for whom scandal was a sacred, abstract something worse than death. But did it really hold water?

"Thank you, Sir Adrian. I won't trouble you any longer."

He smiled pleasantly and I left the house.

I crept round to the french windows and located Elliot who was cursing volubly about the cold. "It would freeze everything off a brass monkey," he complained.

"Did you hear what Sir Adrian said?"

"Yes. I think we'd better retire at once and take what pension we can get. We'll be the laughing stock of 'C' Division for months to come!"

"Then you're convinced it was an accident?"

"Hell, I don't know. What matters is that we can't prove it wasn't. Come on, sarge. I'll freeze to death if I stay here."

We moved on across the grass, Elliot flapping his arms to get warm.

"We've stuck our necks out all right," he said. "You may be McKay's bright boy, sarge, but there's going to be a nice old rumpus over this. You acted in the face of superior authority, and Sir Adrian could get you slammed."

"I know. I know. But, damn it, I still don't believe that Richard Winter came back here and took a cold bath at ten o'clock in the evening. I don't care if he had consumed all the liquor in Scotland."

"No need to convince me," said Elliot. "I agree with you. I'm on your side. But it's a small point to hang a case on when every other blasted thing is against you."

"Anyway, I'm not giving in yet. I've got to locate Doris. She fits into the pattern somewhere."

"What's she like?" he asked.

"Blonde and come-hither. Just your type. But she only obliges actors."

"Well, as an amateur, I played the lead in the 'Chinese Bungalow' . . ."

"I'm afraid that wouldn't count."

"Too bad," he said sadly. "My sex life is getting neglected."

CHAPTER NINE

WHEN I got home I did not go to bed. I knew I wouldn't be able to sleep, so I made some coffee, sank into an armchair, and proceeded to think about the story Sir Adrian told me. It had seemed that he was speaking the truth, and yet so many things were left unexplained. Why, for instance, had Richard Winter suddenly walked out on the play? If he hadn't wanted to do it why had he started it in the first place? The eve of the dress rehearsal was rather late to change his mind. Besides, there was no evidence that he had ever done such a thing before. It was true he had on occasion been so drunk he couldn't rehearse, but he had never voluntarily turned in a part. Could those pages of Macbeth explain his unprecedented action?

Again, why had he sent telegrams to his wife, his brother, and his understudy? Just to tell them formally that he wasn't going to act in the play? But if that were so, why hadn't he invited his daughter and the producer as well? No, there must have been some other reason, and I had a hunch that Sir Adrian knew what it was.

Finally—and this one stuck in my gullet no matter how it was served up—was it reasonable for Winter to have stepped into an ice cold bath at ten o'clock in the evening? The excuse was that he had been drunk. Yet he'd managed to talk intelligently to Sir Adrian and the others from the landing. He couldn't have been absolutely paralytic. And if he had been paralytic, then he couldn't have got into the bath at all.

I was annoyed. I knew that McKay would say I had made a fool of myself. It wouldn't end there, either. Sir Adrian might smile pleasantly, but he was sure to make things awkward for me because I had ridden him so hard. He would

set the official wheels moving and I would find myself on an endless belt of a dozen assorted mats during the next fortnight. I would be relegated to routine jobs and that would be that.

It would be wiser to stop now, to turn it in as Elliot had suggested. I could bow low, say I had been mistaken, that I was extremely sorry for the trouble caused. I could fix it so that there would be no hitch at the inquest, then eat humble pie for the next six months and hope for the best.

But the case had got hold of me. If I'd been a medium Winter's ghost couldn't have clung closer. It was as though he possessed me and was sardonically driving me on. I was more certain than ever it was murder. But by whom? And for what motive? No simple investigation had disclosed that. It was different from anything I had ever touched before. Since Monday I had gradually taken a man to pieces, a man with a score of conflicting, contradictory facets. I had stripped him down, but I hadn't yet found out what made him work.

Most people have a desire, coherent or incoherent, which is the guiding factor of their existence. They may perhaps not know about it, but it is there just the same. Did the theatre epitomise Winter's desire? Was that the real man, the romantic figure who strode before the footlights for two and a half-hours every evening?

The majority of actors are vain. Were they not so, they would choose a less hazardous, less heart-breaking occupation when they see that success is eluding them. But once started, they seldom give it up. They plod on, no matter the hardship. Inside them burns a fire, an urge that is only satisfied when they are playing on the stage. If they cannot do this they are unhappy.

I wondered if this was the way with Winter. It seemed logical that it should be. And yet . . . he had walked out on a play . . . a play that would have assured him a big come-back success . . .

It didn't appear to make sense. But then none of it made sense. There were no motives beyond the obvious ones. Janet could have killed him because of the money. Sir Adrian could have killed him because of Christine. Yet, as Elliot wisely pointed out, Janet was not the type to kill in that way, and I privately felt that she wasn't the type to kill for that motive, either. And Sir Adrian? So smart a bird would have made sure of Christine before taking such a risky

amble. But that he hadn't, was obvious from the conversation I had overheard.

The night wore on. That peculiar stillness that is a feature of London's black-out descended over the city. Only now and then did you hear a cab or the trailing rumble of a freight lorry. I turned out the lights and drew the curtains. A chilly moon was set in the sky and the windows were steamed over. A weird collection of chimneys reached upwards. It is only at night you notice how oddly assembled they are. They sprawl over the roofs like some prolific fungi.

And beneath the myriad smoke-belching funnels people were living and dying each day. I was concerned merely with the death of one man. My eyes were heavy with cigarette smoke and my head was aching. I began to feel that Winter's passing was of little importance. I was tempted to give up, to have done with a case which was so complex. I might even have persuaded myself that Winter had died accidentally, but for one fact which drummed continually through my brain.

Why had Winter taken a cold bath? Why?

A ridiculous question, yet I could find only one answer to it. He did not belong to the cleanliness brigade, to the spartan band who greet life with an aggressive vigour. A hot bath would have been different. But I could no more see him settling comfortably into icy water at ten o'clock on a frosty evening in an unheated house than I could imagine the Chancellor of the Exchequer suddenly forgiving everybody their income-tax.

True, you could argue that he hadn't known the water was cold, that he had unwittingly stepped into the bath and had been so overcome by the shock he had toppled backwards. Or you could take the more popular view. You could cloak it all with the statement that he had been drunk. When a man is drunk he is incapable: and when he is incapable anything can happen.

But I could believe neither of these solutions.

I was convinced it was murder. But the pointer of my conviction was not strong enough to stand against determined assault. There was little to back it up. Whoever had knocked off Winter had been astonishingly cunning, had displayed a resource that dictated a premeditated killing. It was no spur of the moment affair, but a carefully planned execution.

My thoughts started to wander. I was muzzy. I decided

to make some more coffee. Just then there was a slight noise at the door and Anna appeared in dressing-gown and slippers. She stood there yawning and looking very beautiful. The sleep was still in her eyes. She flicked on the light before I could stop her.

I hurriedly drew the curtains.

"You'll be getting us fined," I said. I went over and kissed her. Her face was warm and smooth.

"How was I to know you'd drawn the black-out? Darling, why don't you come to bed?"

"I've been working," I said.

"But it's so late. You won't be fit for anything in the morning."

"I'll be all right. Now you go back to bed, my sweet."

"What's worrying you, darling?"

"Winter."

She sat down on the arm of the chair. She ran her fingers through my hair. "They don't pay you to work so hard, dear."

I told her I knew that. Crime detection is the worst paid job in the world—or almost. If you do it honestly there is a hell of a lot of overtime. If you don't care—well, you can have a pretty easy life.

"But," she started, "Stuart said——"

"I don't care a damn what Stuart said."

"You mean you think it was a murder?"

"Mmm." I lit a cigarette. She took it from my mouth, puffed at it for a moment, and then put it back between my lips again. I began to tell her my reasons. Step by step I went over the evidence, enumerating all the facts, leaving nothing out. It was an hour before I was through. She was leaning against me, sleepy but intrigued.

"The trouble is," I said when I had finished, "I don't know where to go from here. I'm stumped."

She was a little while before she had answered. I began to suspect that she had dropped off.

Then she spoke. "What about Doris?"

"Doris? You mean——?"

"Don't you think she probably knows more about Winter than all the rest put together?"

"But she's so dumb."

"That's just the point. It is because she is so dumb that she would know about Winter."

It was quite a while before I saw the significance of this startling statement. At that hour I was too tired to figure anything, and Anna was smiling enigmatically and refusing to explain it any further.

So there was no choice but to go to bed.

The next morning it was raining. It fell in thick shafts, causing the gutters to overflow and the wood-blocked roadway to spurt small fountains as the traffic passed over. Soon the pavements were coated with a thin layer of mud and, as if to add to the misery, a river mist enveloped the city.

The heating in the C.I.D. office is never remarkable but that morning it was turned off altogether because of trouble with one of the intake pipes. I sat and shivered, wondering irritably why Elliot was so late.

The phone rang and Stuart's voice came through.

"How is the intrepid sleuth this morning?"

"I would be all right if I could get warm."

"You seem to have raised quite a tumult and a shouting last night. Sir Adrian is breathing gusts of fire. At least, that's what Christine told me."

"Really," I said, trying to conceal annoyance. "You and Christine are getting quite pally."

"But that's how it should be, old man. The biographer and the widow of the celebrity always get together. This afternoon I am having tea with her and we shall browse through old press notices and Edwardian programmes."

"In that case you'd better put on a clean shirt."

"Now, now, there's no need to get personal. . . . Have you discovered who killed Cock Robin yet?"

"You did," I said.

"How intriguing! When, may I ask?"

"Saturday night. At a few minutes after ten."

"How did I do it?"

"You drowned him."

"Dear me. It's too bad that I happened to be in the Café Royal with three very respectable characters at that hour, isn't it?"

"Just as well," I said. "Or I might build up a case."

His voice sounded grieved. "I believe you would, too." He paused and the line crackled. "Actually I rang up to give you some information, but I'm not sure that I shall now." He paused again. "Still, I'm not one to bear malice. I will tell

you, despite the insults. Last night I was drinking beer with some literary lights of the lesser order. I happened to mention the name of Thelma Kingston——"

"Who?"

"Thelma Kingston. The authoress of those playscripts you found in that brief case of Winter's."

"Oh, yes," I said.

"Well, I've got her address. Apparently she works as a stenographer in an office off Fleet Street. She's got a small flat at Lancaster Gate."

He gave me the address and I took it down.

"Now I think you ought to say thank you," he added.

I snorted into the phone and he laughed.

"I'll be coming to collect that five pounds to-morrow." He laughed some more and then rang off.

When Elliot finally arrived I was prepared to read him a lecture on punctuality and what-not, but he just gave one of his ear-to-ear smiles and sat down. "I've been working, sarge," he said smugly.

"At the blonde?"

He was shocked at this suggestion. He explained carefully that when he said working he meant working. "For the last two hours I have been checking on Sir Adrian."

I looked at my watch. "He must have been up early."

"He was. That's the point."

"Well?"

"I happened to make friends with the switchboard girl in the block where Sir Adrian has his flat. She is a very intelligent girl and when Sir Adrian started using the blower so early she gave me a tinkle. I shall have to entertain her for all the trouble she has taken. But then, I can charge it to expenses, can't I?"

"We'll see," I said. "What about Sir Adrian?"

"He was phoning up a lot of hotels, at least that's what the switchboard girl said. She doesn't know the names of all of them, of course. Eventually he must have got what he wanted because he left the block by the back way. The man we had down there on duty was not expecting this. Besides, you'd told him not in any circumstances to risk Sir Adrian knowing he was being watched. So Sir Adrian almost got away without being seen. Fortunately, I was there by that time and I spotted him. He took a cab and went towards Bloomsbury. I followed, but he must have known what was

happening because he managed to get out of the cab without my seeing him. So there I was, chasing a cab with nobody in it."

"You mean to say you lost him!" I snapped.

"I'm afraid so." Elliot toyed with a pencil. "Still, we do know that he was heading for Bloomsbury."

"We don't know anything of the kind. If he took the trouble to throw you off the scent, then he could have done a sort of circular tour."

Elliot shook his head. "The last number he phoned was a Bloomsbury number."

"Maybe that fixes it," I said slowly. "I wonder what he's after."

Suddenly several things clicked into position. In a flash I realised why Sir Adrian was going to Bloomsbury. I guessed at a whole lot more, too, but in this business you have to do one thing at a time.

"Have we got a picture of Doris?"

"We picked one up last night."

"Then get it—quickly!"

Elliot moved to the door. "I say, sarge, you don't think——"

"Get that picture!" I barked. "We can do all the thinking afterwards."

We started on the fringe of Bloomsbury and worked towards the centre. Nowadays it is a depressing area, full of faded remnants of departed glory. The blitz has speeded its decline and fall, tearing great gaps in the ranks of blackened houses and ripping chunks of plaster from the sedate porticos.

It is peopled with a strange variety of types. Students, actors, seedy intellectuals, and an odd collection of societies for the prevention or the encouragement of everything under the sun. Spattered liberally over the whole is a vast number of hotels, lodging-houses, and one-roomed flats. Some of them conduct a shady business where questions are seldom asked and credit is seldom given. The rooms of these places are barrack-like in their bareness and have witnessed so much hurried passion that they have developed an impersonal cynicism.

Our progress through the area was punctuated with whispered conversations between managers and receptionists

in foyers adorned by potted palms. The earth at the base was covered with crushed cigarette stubs.

"Have you seen this girl?"

The photograph passed from hand to hand. The manager a little nervous.

"No, sir. No, we haven't seen her. . . . Would you like to look at the register?"

"No, thanks."

So it was. Time after time, till the answers grew as monotonous as the speaking voice on a Tube lift. The potted palms grew fewer and then disappeared altogether. The entrances became smaller, dirtier. Still the same replies.

"No, sir, would you like to see the register, sir?" The manner too obsequious, the hand-washing too violent.

My temper wore thin and Elliot was in one of his fractious moods.

"Let's give up, sarge, and have a drink."

"We've only got about a dozen more places."

"If I had my way we'd sing a couple of hymns, bury Winter and have done with it."

"Come on," I said. "Let's move to the next one."

This proved to be an ordinary house with the addition of a small glass roof over the entrance bearing the name of the hotel. A taxi was drawn up in front, the driver pacing the pavement and slapping his gloved hands together.

We stalked inside and presented the photograph. I expected the same formula, the same denials, and was surprised when the manager nodded nervously.

"She's got a room here."

"Is she in?"

"Well, I . . . there's a gentleman with her."

"Is he tall with grey hair?"

"And wearing a dark brown overcoat?" added Elliot.

Once more the manager nodded. "I think so."

"We'll wait," I said. "Somewhere we shan't be seen."

The manager understood. His face grew several shades lighter when he realised we intended to be discreet.

"Certainly, certainly. Here, I think?"

"That's fine," I said. We sat down on a bench in an alcove behind the staircase. Elliot lit a cigarette and let it smoulder at an acute angle from his lips.

I waited anxiously. I was feeling elated. Had I been right? Was this the beginning of the end? Yet there might

be some other explanation. Sir Adrian and Doris in a Bloomsbury hotel! Surely that only spelt one thing?

The minutes ticked away. The manager was standing against the side of the entrance. From where we sat he was just a grotesque silhouette.

Presently the stairs creaked under a heavy footstep. It was Sir Adrian. He looked neither to the right nor to the left. He scarcely noticed the manager. He kept straight on and walked into the street, going up to the stationary cab. The driver hurried over, Sir Adrian got in, shouted some destination, and the taxi drove off.

I got up at once. The manager hovered nearby, wondering what we were going to do next.

"The number of the room?" I asked.

"Ten. On the third floor."

Elliot and I climbed the stairs. They got narrower after each floor. Finally we came to a stop outside a door labelled with a brass "10" which had been screwed in crooked.

I knocked and twisted the handle. The catch scraped and I pushed the door open.

It was a nondescript room with a bed, an armchair which was pock-marked with cigarette burns, two ordinary chairs, and a wash basin attached to the wall. Against the other wall stood a large, cheaply veneered wardrobe.

On the bed sat Doris. The blonde hair hung in the immaculate page-boy bob about her shoulders. Her figure was cased in a silk wrap through which you could see the colour of her skin. Her face jerked up when she noticed us. The lips were set slightly apart and the grey eyes betrayed nothing.

Even, seeing her for the second time, I was still astonished at her beauty.

Elliot had a positive leer as he looked at her. I leant against a chair.

"Ben was worried about you, Doris."

"I'm not going back there," she said in her ugly voice. You couldn't tell whether she was scared or indifferent. Around her were spread a number of magazines which dealt largely with fashions in clothes. "Why have you come here?"

"To fetch you, Doris. You oughtn't to've walked out like that."

"I ain't done a thing. I don't have to tell everybody where I go, do I?"

S.F.A.

There was a stillness in the room, as though everything had stayed like that for years.

"Why did you leave, Doris?"

"That's my business."

Quickly I bent over the bed and snatched up a handbag that was lying there. I opened it and saw a large packet of notes, hundred pound notes. I counted them casually.

"Ten thousand quid, I should say. Quite a lot of money, eh, Doris?"

She didn't answer. Her eyes, glared, defiant and sulky.

"Did you get it from Sir Adrian?"

Still no reply.

I didn't know how to tackle her. I had no real intention of going to "The Bells." And yet I wanted to frighten her. The suspicions I possessed were nebulous, and yet I had a feeling they were right.

"You'd better get dressed, Doris."

"I'm not going."

"Will you tell me where you got that money?"

She shook her head violently.

"Why did you suddenly come here?" I went on.

"I was fed up."

"How?"

"I was fed up with that bloody bar. Years I've been there. I was tired of getting up at the same time each morning, of working when other people was enjoying themselves. Uncle Ben was all right, but he always treated me as though I was a kid. He didn't realise that I'd grown up." She hesitated and then continued. "I've been thinking about leaving for a long while. Now I've done it."

There was a slight hysterical note in the childish voice, the nearest approach to an emotion that she had registered so far. It was odd that so much beauty could have been allied to so little brain. She had the stubborn obstinacy of a small girl housed in the body of a woman. It was at once fascinating and alarming.

"You've got to tell me about that money, Doris."

"I won't!"

"Then I shall have to arrest you." I couldn't, of course, but bluff is a good weapon.

"No!" It was almost a shout.

"Get dressed," I said. "We'll be waiting outside for you."

"You can't arrest me! I ain't done nothing!"

"Where did you get that money?"

"I promised not to tell. It was a present, sêe."

"From Sir Adrian?"

"If I tell you, will you leave me alone?"

"I'll see." I was doing my best to look hard and tough.

Elliot had his hat on the back of his head and might have stepped straight out of a cops and robbers movie. "Now, for the last time, where did you get that money?"

There was a pause. She twisted her hands together, unable to decide.

Then she glanced at the magazines on the bed. "He gave it to me," she said. "Sir Adrian."

"Why?"

"It was a present. I told you."

"People like Sir Adrian do not give presents of ten thousand pounds for nothing."

She was silent.

I could picture with what pain Sir Adrian would part with so much money. Only one motive could have forced him into it. I was sure now, surer than I'd been at any moment since the beginning of the case. The pattern was becoming clear and the portrait of the dead actor growing sharper every second.

"You've got to tell the truth, Doris," I said. "It doesn't matter what you've promised."

The sullen expression did not change.

I went close to her. I spoke very softly. "What was Richard Winter to you?" I asked.

She seemed scared then. Her hands moved to her face. I thought she was going to cry. Instead, she pushed back her hair and looked straight at me.

"We was going to be married. . . ."

Although I had half expected it, the revelation still shook me. When you thought of Winter and the golden path of glory that he trod, and then you thought of Doris you were puzzled as to what there could have been between them.

"When were you going to be married?"

"As soon as he could get a divorce."

"You loved him?"

"He was ever so nice. . . . He said he didn't believe in love and all that nonsense. He just wanted me to be myself and him to be himself."

To be himself. And what was that?

"When did he ask you to marry him?"

"Well : . . he'd mentioned it before, but he finally asked me on last Friday evening, just as he was going away in the taxi."

An idea struck me. "And I suppose he was going to make a will in your favour."

"Oh, he'd done that already. You see, I couldn't really make up my mind. He wasn't exactly young and I had to think of myself."

The childish simplicity of it! She cared nothing for the aura of greatness which surrounded Winter. She merely wanted money to buy toys—dresses, furs, visits to the picture palace. It smacked more of the barter of the native than the guile of the gold-digger.

"Did Ben know about this?"

"No . . . I didn't tell him. He'd have tried to stop me."

"Did you kill Richard Winter?"

"What a wicked thing to say!" She was very shocked.

"Why would I do that?"

Why, indeed? If Winter lived she married him and when he finally died she came into his money. There was little point in killing him. What was more, I was certain that in her strange way she liked the actor. She genuinely found his company "fun."

"And just now you handed the will to Sir Adrian and he gave you ten thousand pounds. Is that right?"

"I didn't want to cause no trouble. . . . I rang him up and he asked me to meet him. . . . That's why I come here."

"And you weren't going back to 'The Bells'?"

"Not likely. Not ever."

I could imagine her cutting a dash with the ten thousand, living like one of the characters in the cheap fiction she read so avidly.

"Where were you last Saturday night, Doris?"

"In the pub."

"You never went out the whole evening?"

"No. Uncle Ben was there with me." Her hand clutched my arm. "You won't tell him about this, will you?"

"I can't promise."

"I don't want no trouble, see. I told Sir Adrian that I'd never say a word."

It must have been an immense relief to the baronet to find her so amenable. Though ten thousand was a lot of cash, it was cheap for the suppression of such red-hot scandal. The Winter reputations were saved all round, and Christine's legend would remain untarnished.

"You stay here, you understand? You may not be needed at the inquest to-morrow, but if you attempt to leave I'll come after you."

"I won't leave. Really, I won't."

"Right," I said. "That's all for now then."

We left her sitting there, slightly dazed. I wondered what would have happened if she had married Winter, if he had lived and they had gone off together. She cared nothing for the theatre. How would that have fitted in with Winter's stage activities? His friends would have cold-shouldered her. She had no intelligence. She could not enter into a conversation that lasted longer than five minutes. The actors who had slept with her before had used her merely to gratify a temporary lust. They would never have dreamt of marrying her. Yet Winter had planned to do so. Why?

"What a carcase," observed Elliot. "But fancy hearing that voice first thing in the morning!"

CHAPTER TEN

At five-thirty Elliot and I arrived at the Regent Theatre. Already the gallery queues were relinquishing their stools and standing on the wet pavement for the final quarter of an hour before they would be admitted. Buskers were struggling to be funny in the rain, but the weather was winning hands down.

We passed through the stage-door and sat waiting in Gerald Carson's dressing-room.

I gazed around the blank walls and tried to imagine what it had been like to be Richard Winter. But I only succeeded in picturing myself as an actor which was quite a different thing.

Elliot yawned. "We're on the last lap, sarge."

"Let's hope to God something breaks before the morning," I said. I didn't want to fail. It would be so ignominious.

Presently the door opened and Gerald Carson walked in.

Without make-up he was even more of a pale imitation of Winter. If you looked at him through half closed eyes you might almost mistake him for the dead actor. He was somewhat embarrassed at finding us there.

"I'm sorry to trouble you again, Mr. Carson, but there are a few questions I'd like to ask you."

"I'll do my best to answer them." He smiled shyly.
"You don't mind if I start to make up, do you?"

"Not at all. You go ahead."

He removed his overcoat and changed into the suit which he wore in the part. Then he pulled on an old stained dressing-gown and went to work with cold cream and grease paint.

"I understand," I said, "that you received a telegram from Richard Winter on Saturday morning?"

He stopped abruptly, the stick of grease paint poised between his fingers.

"I beg your pardon?"

"You received a telegram from Richard Winter on Saturday morning asking you to be at the house in Hampstead in the evening."

He was obviously afraid to commit himself. His attitude now was typical of the way he faced life. I felt that he was for ever in a perpetual quandary as to which of two paths he would take.

"It's all right," I said. "Sir Adrian has admitted it."

"Oh, well, in that case. . . . Yes, I did."

"You went there in the evening?"

"Yes."

"At what time?"

"I was there at approximately twenty-five minutes past nine." -- He was more confident, working some lake into the hollow of his eyes.

"And did you find anyone there?"

"Mrs. Winter was already there. I think she said she had arrived about five minutes earlier."

"Was there any sign of Richard Winter?"

"No. A few minutes later Sir Adrian arrived. I think must have been half past nine."

"Did you know at all what the meeting was about?"

"Er--no."

He seemed uncertain over that one, but I didn't press him.

"Now, perhaps you wouldn't mind telling me what happened after that?"

He was starting to stick on the false moustache with spirit gum.

"Well . . . we waited for quite a while. Perhaps twenty minutes, perhaps half an hour. But there was no sign of Winter. I thought he was indulging in one of his practical jokes. He was apt to send fake telegrams to people, you know. He had a perverted sense of humour."

"What sort of telegrams did he send?"

"Various kinds. I know one actor who was with him who trailed all the way to Scotland because Winter had faked a telegram saying that the poor man's aunt had died."

"I see. Right. Go on." I could quite believe that a joke of that cruel kind would appeal to Winter's sardonic streak.

"Just before ten, or it may have been at ten. I couldn't quite say which, we were astonished to see Winter standing up on the first landing. He appeared to be very drunk. He was leaning heavily against the bannisters."

"How was he dressed?"

"Er—I really forget."

"Was he wearing a dressing-gown?"

Carson hesitated, his forefinger stained with carmine.

"Yes, that's right. A dressing-gown."

I remembered distinctly that Sir Adrian had spoken of Richard Winter's *clothes being crumpled*. But I said nothing. A mistake like that might be quite innocent. People who are not trained in observation go sadly awry at times.

"Did any one of you speak to him?"

"No, we were so surprised. He smiled at us in an unpleasant manner."

"Did he speak?"

"Yes. I will try and remember the exact words. I think it was: 'I'm glad to see you're all here. Well, you can wait until I've had a bath.' Then he went to the bathroom."

"Were you aware that the gas was not connected, that the water would be extremely cold?"

"I didn't realise it at the time. You see, I didn't know very much about the house. I had only been there as a guest."

"Go on."

He hesitated once more and I could tell he was wondering exactly what Sir Adrian had admitted. "Mrs. Winter was very agitated. She was so very upset that he was drunk."

She wanted to go and argue with him, but Sir Adrian persuaded her against it."

"And you still did not know why he had sent for you?"

"No. We waited for a long time. It might have been three-quarters of an hour. Sir Adrian was in a flaring temper. He felt that his brother was purposely dawdling upstairs. I must confess I was a little worried."

"Did the previous bath episode in America occur to you then?"

"I think it did. I am a little confused about what actually happened. But I was always worried that something terrible would happen to Winter. We had had several narrow shaves in the past with his drinking."

"I see."

"Well, Sir Adrian said he was going to hurry him up and I said I would come with him. I could sometimes handle Winter when the others couldn't. We went upstairs. Sir Adrian knocked on the door. But there was no reply. Presently we opened the door."

"It was not locked?"

"No, I don't think so."

"Go on."

"Sir Adrian went in and I heard him gasp with horror. I followed quickly. The light was on and Winter was lying in the bath. His head was under the water and we realised he was dead." He was shamefaced and nervous. "You must understand that I had no criminal motive in not telling you this before. It was a conclusion we arrived at together. We did not want any scandal attached to the affair. And as it was so obviously an accident. . . ."

"Sir Adrian has explained all that," I said. "Now, did anything else happen while you were in the bathroom?"

He was uncertain about this. Then he said no. It was amusing the way he had avoided all reference to Ernie whom he must obviously have seen. He did not know that Ernie was under lock and key or that Sir Adrian had modified the story. Suddenly it occurred to me that Ernie had never mentioned seeing Carson in the bathroom. He had said that he caught a glimpse of a 'woman and another bloke.' Yet, if Sir Adrian's story was true and Carson's story was true, then Carson must have met Ernie.

There might be something in that, or there might not. I gazed steadily at Carson. He hadn't told everything,

not by a long way. He was fussing over his make-up like an old woman.

A call-boy passed along the corridor shouting the quarter of an hour.

Carson hastened with the finishing touches, dropping the grease paints back into a box.

"Is that all, er—sergeant?"

"No, Mr. Carson, it isn't. During my investigations on this case I have been puzzled continually by the behaviour of Richard Winter. I know much more than you think I know. For instance, I could tell you a great deal concerning his future plans. All that information I'm treating as confidential. It shall not get into the press unless it is vitally necessary. But there are various doubts which still persist in my mind and I want to clear them up before the inquest to-morrow. I would like you to cast your thoughts back to last Friday. Richard Winter was late for rehearsal. When he finally arrived he was paralytic drunk. He was left in a dressing-room to recover. . . . Now, did you see him at all while he was there?"

"No."

"I want you to think, carefully, Mr. Carson. You thought a great deal of Richard Winter, didn't you?"

"Well . . ." he began and then stopped.

"Let's put it another way. You considered him a great actor and you are desperately fond of the theatre?"

"Yes."

"Right, now. This is how I see it. Richard Winter had been away for three years from the stage. He was making a come-back. You had been with him for a long time. I suggest you would be anxious when you saw him so very drunk. I suggest you would go into the dressing-room where he was and you would argue with him, try and pull him round."

"I prefer not to answer that question. It can have no possible bearing on his death." For once there had been no hesitation. The reply had come quickly.

"It has a considerable bearing on his death. Winter's actions were seemingly inconsistent. I don't pretend to know very much about the theatre, but I do feel that his exit from this play requires an explanation. He was such a great actor. His heart and soul must have been behind the foot-lights . . ."

"Stop!" Carson held up his hand. He was trembling.

Under the grease-paint his features were tense. Was it anger, or was it fear?

"Stop," he repeated. "I can't bear to talk of it any more. Would you mind?"

"Time is short," I said bluntly. "You must tell me whatever you know, Mr. Carson."

"I've told you everything." He fumbled with his dressing-gown and wrenched it off in a clumsy fashion, splitting it under one of the sleeves.

I smiled at him. "There's no need to get so agitated. Wherever I go people are scared that I will discover something about Richard Winter that they feel I ought never to know. I think they are frightened lest I might destroy the idol. I don't want to do that, Mr. Carson. I saw him act several times. For me that is enough. He gave one of the most magnificent performances I have ever seen. It was an amazing experience and I am grateful to him. What he may or may not have done in his private life will not affect that memory in any way."

"I wonder," said Carson, "if I dare tell you. You see, I have told no one."

"You *must* tell me." I kept my eyes on him. "I promise you the information shall not be used unless it is absolutely necessary."

He sat down again and patted some more powder into his face. He was sweating. When he spoke there was a bitterness in his voice that had not been there before.

"You said just now that Winter's heart and soul must have been in the theatre."

"Yes?"

"They weren't, you know. That is, if he had a heart or a soul. He hated the theatre."

I couldn't quite understand it. "How do you mean?" I asked.

"He hated the theatre! That's plain enough for you, isn't it?"

"But he was such a genius of an actor."

"I know." Carson placed his hands on the bench. "That's what makes it so dreadful. . . . I have been in the theatre since I was fourteen. I have spent my life in it. I have had no other interest. I have tried very hard to be good. I wanted so desperately to be a star. Not for the money. I've never had expensive tastes. But just for the

feeling of fulfilment you get from it. I have studied painstakingly. . . . But a long time ago I knew I would never get what I wanted. I would never reach the top.

"Yet Winter had all those things I wanted so desperately and he didn't give a damn for them. He had talent, genius, call it what you will. He couldn't help being brilliant. He was a born actor. And he hated the stage! A thing that would take others hours to work out he did by instinct. In Shakespeare half the time he scarcely knew what his lines meant. But he said them magnificently!"

The bitterness in his voice grew stronger. "I have watched him for years. He used to make fun of me and my love for the theatre. He liked to shock me, to show me how little he cared for the stage. When audiences clapped him he despised them. 'Damn lot of fools!' he'd say.

"He didn't like theatre people, either. He avoided them as much as he could. And he was scathing about their puny attempts to match his brilliance. You see, they had to work terribly hard to do what he did naturally. He was vain, of course. But his vanity took the form of indifference. He loved to show off to people, to make them see how contemptuous he was of the art which had made him famous."

I was getting near the truth at last. Winter was losing his final wrapping of tinfoil. "But why was he like that?" I asked.

Carson was gazing fixedly at the rough wood of the bench. All the pent-up repressions of his life were sweeping through him. "He was a common man. He liked being common. He made a cult of ignorance and laughed at anything at all intelligent or highbrow. He hardly ever read a book. He loathed mixing with people who discussed art and literature. He was only happy among the lowest grade of humanity. Sometimes when he went off on one of his blinds, we would find him in a drinking den talking to just anybody. He was crude in mind and body. I think he felt uncomfortable in the presence of more cultured people. At least, that is the theory I have evolved. It is the only way I can explain his excessive rudeness to the fascinating women who laid their charms at his feet. I think it was the same with both his wives. Perhaps more so with Mrs. Christine. You see, she loves the theatre as I do."

I began to get a picture of the real Winter. I saw him sneaking off from celebrated gatherings to tell the latest

smutty story to an admiring group of labourers. I glimpsed now why he had stuck to Ben all these years. He was at home in the "Bells." It was the atmosphere he understood, the atmosphere he liked. No wonder he hated Christine who tried to glorify the very thing he held in contempt! How he must have loathed that Louis XIV salon and the leather-bound French classics! And his daughter's enthusiasm for the theatre must have destroyed all his parental affection for her. That much was clear.

"But why did he go on? Why didn't he leave the stage?"

"I've thought of that, too. I've often wondered what talent is. They say that genius is an urge that drives a man on. I'm sure that Winter had such an urge inside him. I think it drove him on, despite his emotional reactions, despite his hatred of the theatre. I think it haunted him. I don't think he could shake it off. He was a man continually in conflict, fighting his own talent."

"Have you any proof of that?"

He nodded. "You were asking about last Friday. Well, when he came in drunk I feared very much for the play. I have a great affection for Janet and I wanted her young man to have a success. They took him to the dressing-room, and after a while I went along to see if I could talk to him. He had come round a bit and he glared at me. 'What does little Gerry want?' he asked. 'You've got to pull yourself together,' I said. 'You must. You owe it to Janet.' He thought that was funny. He laughed so much I thought he was going to be sick. Then he went on: 'To hell with Janet! To hell with the whole damn bunch of 'em! I'm through, Gerry. Through, see!'

"I couldn't understand what he was talking about. Then he produced two envelopes. In each was a page of *Macbeth*. He showed them to me. 'Some bloody fool is trying to make me nervous,' he roared. You see, he had only appeared in *Macbeth* once and that was many years ago. One night he went on the stage and I think he was more drunk than usual. Anyhow, he dived completely. He couldn't remember a line. It was the only moment when his vanity was shaken. We covered it up as best as we could and after ten minutes he was his normal self. He never did *Macbeth* again.

"He pushed the pages of *Macbeth* under my nose. 'I'm through, Gerry. Whatever well-wisher sent these damn notes

has hit the nail right on the head ! ' He smiled and I couldn't understand what he meant.

" ' Do you recall what happened in *Macbeth* ? ' he asked. I said I did. ' Well,' he said, ' it's happened again. This time it's permanent. My memory's gone. I can't remember a line of that damn silly play this morning ! '

" I was shocked. I told him that it would get better if he had a rest. I said I would help him to memorise the lines. I reminded him that Ellen Terry had suffered from the same thing, but that she had overcome the difficulty.

" Then he burst out laughing. ' I don't want to be helped ! ' he shouted. ' I've waited and waited and waited for the moment when I could leave the bloody theatre for good. At last it has come. Now my conscience is free. If I can't remember lines I can't act ! Don't you see, Gerry, I'm through ! '

" I honestly believe that his memory was bad. The urge of his talent was too strong inside him to be appeased by a false excuse. But, faced with this ultimatum, it had to give way to the other half of him. The battle was over.

" I did my best to dissuade him. I flattered him. I told him what a great position he held, how there was no one to take his place. But he wouldn't listen. He had got what he wanted. He was like a man who has been let out of prison after serving a life sentence.

" You can imagine how I felt. All my life I had yearned to be even half as brilliant as he was. I was bitterly angry. I knew that no one would shake him from his decision. He would never appear on a stage again. Richard Winter, one of the greatest actors in the world, was walking out and it was terrible to see the pleasure it gave him. I couldn't stand it any more. I left the dressing-room and went to get a drink to steady myself. When I came back an hour later he had gone."

There it was. The whole of it. Time was needed to adapt oneself to the new vistas it opened up. Carson was glancing at his watch. It was practically time for him to go on.

Down in the auditorium the audience would be sliding into their seats. A glow of light would show at the bottom of the curtain. Presently the canned music would fade out and amid a hush the curtain would swing up. The play would commence and Carson would walk through the part that had been tailored for the great Winter.

Despite all his efforts, despite the loving care he brought to

his art, his performance would be no more than mediocre. Had Winter have been watching from the wings he would have laughed sardonically. It was the sort of joke that appealed to him.

"Just two more points, Mr. Carson. First, have you any idea why Winter sent for you and Mrs. Winter and Sir Adrian to be at the house on Saturday evening?"

"None at all."

"Can you tell me where he was between Friday night and Saturday night?"

"I haven't the vaguest notion."

And with that we left.

As we walked out through the stage-door I began to understand what Winter had seen in Doris. Her beauty would fulfil all his sensuous requirements, and he would approve her lack of intelligence. She'd go into cheap pubs with him, meet the sort of people that amused him, and never try to make him other than what he was. She'd never reproach him for leaving the stage, nor attempt to create a new background for him as Christine had done. It was a perfect arrangement.

Sir Adrian was still in his oak-panelled office, surrounded by phones and cigar smoke. Most of his staff had left, and only a solitary stenographer lurked in the outer precincts.

He looked tired and in that light there was a certain resemblance to Richard Winter in his face. It was the first time I had noticed it, and, in any case, it was only a fleeting likeness. Between the two brothers there had been a gulf that no physical similarity could bridge.

He was not surprised to see me. He told me to sit down. Then he reached for a blue document which lay on his desk and passed it to me.

"That is what I bought this afternoon," he said casually.

"I know." It was a will, signed by Richard Winter, leaving everything to Doris.

"Will you have a drink?"

"No, thanks."

"Cigar?"

"Not now."

"You understand now perhaps my motives for keeping the whole thing quiet."

I met his eyes across the desk. "Suppressing a will is a criminal offence," I said.

He appeared not to hear me. "It was Richard's last act. . . . It expresses his supreme contempt for all of us. . . . Obviously he intended to tell us about it and about his desire to marry that awful girl when he called us to the house on Saturday night. I imagine he would have got a great deal of amusement from our outraged protestations. . . ."

He'd have staged it like a scene from a play, leaving the denouement until the end, working on their conventional fears, laughing at them. The marriage would strike at the roots of Sir Adrian's respectability. The will would humiliate Christine beyond endurance. Yes, Richard would have had a hell of a time.

And yet . . . Somehow there was a doubt in my mind. All his life the actor had been made to do things by the people who surrounded him. He had been forced into deceit and subterfuge to get his own way. The step he was taking was one he had longed to take for years. It was a great temptation to defy them all openly, but was there not, at the same time, an enormous risk that they would retaliate, frustrate his plans, and bring him to heel? To save their faces, they might easily fix it so that he get placed in a mental home. Such things had happened before. Was it logical therefore that Winter, for the sake of half an hour's malicious satisfaction, should jeopardise his whole future?

Maybe it was. Maybe it wasn't. . . .

Sir Adrian, at any rate, was satisfied.

"It is fortunate for us all that he died when he did. I cannot feel any grief, only a deep gratitude that he was not allowed to live to carry out his purpose. I believe that the first test to be applied to anybody is whether he or she happens to be a good human being or not. All other achievements should be secondary to that. Richard may have been an brilliant actor but as a human being he belonged to the dregs."

A smug belief. A fortress wherein the respectable might weave their material pattern. It was natural that it should appeal to Sir Adrian because it presented life as a cut and dried affair. But life was antagonistic to rule and precept. It could combine the greatest qualities and the worst in one individual with barbaric zest.

"How did you know about Doris?" I asked.

"She phoned me and I arranged to meet her at that hotel in Bloomsbury. At the last moment I mislaid the address and had a devil of a job locating the place."

Just then there was a tap on the door and the stenographer put her head inside.

"Will you need me any more, sir?"

"No. That's all." He handed her some letters. "Post these, will you?"

"Yes, sir."

She shut the door and we were alone again.

Sir Adrian lit another cigar. His mood was slightly jovial.

"You are satisfied now? You feel that it cannot have been anything but an accident?"

"I don't know," I said.

"Oh, come, my dear young fellow. Suppose we allow your view. Suppose it was murder. Who could possibly have done it?"

"It might have been a conspiracy. Yourself, Mrs. Winter, and Gerald Carson."

I thought he would be annoyed, but he only laughed.

"Can you imagine Gerald Carson being a party to murder?"

"Not exactly."

"What motive would he have?"

None, of course. Money did not interest him. And his ambition to play Richard's part was negated by his knowledge that he would be far from brilliant in it.

"What are you doing about the will?" I asked.

For the second time he picked it up and passed it to me.

"I am placing it in your custody. Do as you think fit. But, remember, I shall not tolerate any unnecessary airing of our private affairs in a coroner's court."

It was a clever move. Sir Adrian knew that he could sweep me from my position as a man swats a fly. I dare not present anything but the barest evidence. . . . *unless I had proof positive that it was murder.*

CHAPTER ELEVEN

ELLIOT had gone off to make one or two final check-ups, and I walked home in a fretful, nervous mood. Anna and I had a meal, and she tried to interest me in a new dress she was thinking of buying. It wasn't only the money. It was the coupons, she explained.

"Darling, you're not listening."

"Sorry, sweet, I was thinking of something else."

"Isn't everything settled yet?"

"No."

"But the inquest is to-morrow."

"That's right."

"Then . . . ?"

"I'm not satisfied," I said. "Somebody killed Winter. I know it, the way one knows these things. It may be just instinct. It may be illogical, but I'd bet on it with every penny I had."

She glanced across at my plate. "You haven't eaten any of that apple pie. I made it specially for you."

"I'll have it to-morrow. I don't feel like it to-night."

I left the table and sat in an armchair. Anna cleared away the meal, then she came and stood beside me. John was already in bed and we were alone in the lounge.

"Would it help you to tell me about it?" she asked.

"You get on with your book. It'll be much more satisfying. It's got a solution, which is more than I have."

"But I'd like to hear about it. Really."

So I told her of the interviews with Sir Adrian, Carson, and Doris.

She sat in the other chair and smoked a cigarette.

"I still think Doris is the centre of it all," she said when I had finished.

"I'm not so sure."

"But she gets the ten thousand, doesn't she? She's the only one who gains from it."

"That's true." I began to think about Doris, to work back on the things she had told me. But I didn't produce any startling inspiration.

There was nothing for it but to approach the problem in a

methodical manner. Routine was the thing. We wrote down on a piece of paper everyone connected with the case. Then we went down the list. It was a slow business, and it did not get us much further.

Then we outlined Winter's movements from the morning he had arrived drunk to the time when his body had been discovered in the bath.

I could see his entry into the theatre, incapably drunk. The muttered conversations, the whispered gossip among the other members of the cast. Then the cancellation of the rehearsal for that morning. Winter gradually returning to consciousness in the dressing-room, and Carson coming in Carson who had been through all this a thousand times before, who had seen Winter drunk in a myriad dressing-rooms, who had stood in the wings for every performance, nervously watching the great man. Carson, who despised Winter the man, and deified Winter the actor.

Then had come the outburst. . . .

From that moment, it was quite unlike the thousand other occasions. Carson's face had grown whiter as he heard Winter abusing the theatre, slanging the thing he loved.

"My memory's gone, Gerry. I can't remember a line of that damn silly play this morning!"

Carson hastened to the rescue. Winter the actor needed help. He would do anything to ensure that the theatre should not lose such a brilliant member. A bad memory was not an inseparable obstacle. There had been others who had suffered in the same way. But they had gone on acting successfully.

"I don't want to be helped! I've waited and waited and waited for the moment when I could leave the bloody theatre for good. At last it has come. Now my conscience is free. If I can't remember lines, I can't act! Don't you see, Gerry, I'm through!"

Carson had recoiled from this sacrilege. He argued with Winter, told him what a great position he held and how there was no one to take his place. And Winter just laughed. He didn't care a damn. Rage seethed up inside Carson. He, who would have treasured talent, was without it. Yet this man who had talent was casting it aside with no more thought than if he had been throwing away an old overcoat. It was bitterly unfair!

He left Winter, and presently the actor staggered out of

the theatre. Where had he gone? To Hampstead? Or to a bar where he was unknown?

We had no evidence on that point. All we knew was that he had arrived at Ben's pub at seven o'clock. He might have done anything in the interim. Perhaps he had taken out one of those little shop-girls he went to such pains to pick up? That seemed unlikely, for there was Doris. The problem of his sensual desires had been settled.

He had spent an evening in the pub, probably winking continually at Doris, for they held a secret between them.

Suddenly Anna interrupted the train of thought.

"What about Ben. Do you think he knew of the marriage?"

"I doubt it."

"It would give him a good motive for killing Winter."

Ben kill Winter? Destroy the idol that he loved?

"No," I said. "I don't think he did it."

We returned to Winter in the pub. At ten o'clock he had left. Doris went out and found him a taxi. He said he was going to the house in Hampstead.

At eleven o'clock Janet found him in the bedroom, surrounded by piles of clothes. Then had followed the scene between them. He was rude about Lewis' play. She protested that he couldn't let them down.

"Can't I let it down! You watch me. You won't get a penny out of me for the bloody thing! I've finished with it, see!"

Then what? Had she gone, or had she killed him?

According to Carson, Sir Adrian and Christine, Winter was alive on Saturday night. He had spoken to them derisively. He had sent them telegrams in the morning. A dead man couldn't do that.

But the fact remained that from Friday night until ten o'clock Saturday night no one had seen him.

There was no trace whatsoever of his movements, beyond the telegrams.

Then I saw something I had not noticed before.

"Christine was the first to arrive at the house on Saturday night," I said. "Suppose she arrived and found Winter dead? Then what would Sir Adrian do?"

Anna was excited.

"He would want to cover the woman he loved from any suspicion of murder or from any awkward enquiries. He

would evolve a story to prove that Winter was in the house that evening, alive."

"That's right," I said. "But the advent of Ernie made things difficult. Therefore when I pressed him he had to admit that he found Winter dead in the bath, but covered himself by the implication that Winter must have died while they were all downstairs waiting!"

"But," argued Anna, "what about Carson? Wouldn't he be too nervous and scared to agree to the false story?"

"No. You forget that in his statement he never mentioned Ernie at all. If he could be persuaded to lie about that, he could be persuaded to lie about Winter's appearance on the landing."

"Of course," she said. There was a look of triumph in her face. "Darling, we're getting somewhere."

If Winter had died on Friday night, then who had sent the telegrams? Suppose one looked at it another way. Were the telegrams and the resulting scene in the house psychologically true? The idea of throwing a bomb at Sir Adrian and Christine might have appealed to Winter, but it involved great risks. Again, why was Carson included in the party? The understudy already knew that Winter was leaving the stage. The proposed marriage would not affect him in any way. The denouement would be a damp squib as far as he was concerned.

The sending of the telegrams looked more and more like the act of someone who was not aware that Carson and Winter had had that scene in the dressing-room, an act aimed at confusing the actual time of death and making it appear that Winter had died on Saturday night.

"That would link with the anonymous note you received," said Anna. "The one which said Winter died on Saturday."

"And the pages of *Macbeth* that were sent to Winter," I added.

"Darling, that must be it!"

"Yes . . . but how can I prove anything? Sir Adrian, Carson, and Christine will never deviate from their story. They will present a united front, and as long as they do that Winter will have died on Saturday. No amount of arguing will shake their statement."

It was taking shape. The pages of *Macbeth*, the telegrams, the anonymous letter. And what else?

Janet's visit to the house on Friday?

Or . . . ? Suddenly another idea came to me.

"After Doris knew that Winter was dead," I said, "she immediately phoned Sir Adrian and asked him to meet her in that hotel. That was the action of an ordinary gold-digger, a smart, scheming girl who knew her way around. But Doris isn't that type."

Anna thought for a minute.

"You're right there. You mean that someone put Doris up to it, someone suggested she should phone Sir Adrian?"

"Yes . . . someone who was eventually going to get the ten thousand by hook or by crook."

The telephone interrupted us and I went to answer it. Elliot was at the other end.

"How are we doing?" he asked.

"Lousy," I said.

"I've been to that Thelma Kingston woman. That's not her real name. She's called Master. Quite a personable bit of stuff. She said they were her plays and that she had sent them to Winter some time ago."

"So that's a dead end."

"Not exactly. I jollied her along, pretending I was interested in her dramatic efforts. And the funny thing is she didn't seem to know very well what the plays were about."

"She didn't!" I exclaimed.

"No. 'Course, there may be nothing in it. . . ."

"There's a hell of a lot on it," I told him. "Now, I want you to do one other thing."

"At this hour, sarge!"

"I'll make it up to you. I want you to go and see Doris in that Bloomsbury hotel. Treat her carefully. I have a feeling that someone put her up to the idea of phoning Sir Adrian. Some kind friend advised her, if you get what I mean."

"I don't mind seeing Doris," he said. "Not at all I don't. She's definitely something."

"You curb your impulses until you've got that information!"

"Oh, I will," he said with a laugh. "Business before pleasure."

He rang off.

Before I could talk to Anna about Thelma Kingston, there

SHE FELL AMONG ACTORS

came the dismal wail of the air raid siren. It was followed by a heavy burst of gunfire and the drone of planes.

She rushed off and bundled John down to the shelter.

"You must come, too," she said.

"Later."

"But think of all the glass here. It's dreadfully dangerous!"

"Don't worry about me."

She hesitated, and then John's yells sent her hurriedly down the stairs.

The gunfire got worse. I switched off the lights and gazed through the window at the sky. Anti-aircraft shells were bursting like huge red and yellow stars everywhere. Searchlights swept upwards. A German raider droned nervously somewhere in the heavens.

I remembered that odd kink of Winter's. He had not been afraid in those September raids. They had appealed to the elemental side of his nature.

What a character!

Once more the telephone rang. This time I heard Stuart's voice.

"God, I've had a hell of a job getting through to you. Tell me, do I win the five pounds?"

"I don't know," I said.

"You haven't much time left." He laughed. "I could do with the money. I had a summons this morning for my electricity. They've cut it off. So I'm labouring by the light of four candles."

"Too bad," I said.

"Do you know who killed Winter?"

"I think so."

"Come down and talk to me about it."

"I can't. I'm waiting for a call from Elliot."

"When will that come through?"

"Within the next hour, I hope."

"Will you come down after the call. You can get a wonderful view of the raid from here!"

"All right," I said.

"And bring the five pounds!"

I rang off irritably. I hated the thought of losing that much money. It had been a rash bet all right.

I returned to my chair and tried to think amid the noise of the barrage. The pages of *Macbeth*, the telegrams, the

anonymous letter, Doris' phone call to Sir Adrian, and what ?

It was not a large raid, but it threatened to be a long one. Solitary planes roared over every few minutes, and the guns grew ever more furious, filling the air with shrapnel, millions of fragments that fell back to earth, clanging loudly in the roads or on the rooftops.

I began to wonder whether Elliot was having difficulties. Perhaps Doris was not at the hotel, perhaps he was chasing her half over London ?

The hands of the clock slowly moved round. The raid continued.

I paced the room, anxiously. In my pocket was the will which Richard Winter had signed and which left all his estate to Doris. What was I going to do with it ? Would I have to climb down at the last moment, admit that I was mistaken, and face the consequent storm ? Or would I be able to prove myself justified ?

The phone rang. I raced to it.

"Is that you, Hugh ?"

"No," I said angrily, "it is not Hugh."

"Oh, I'm sorry. I must have got the wrong number."

I slammed the receiver down and continued to pace the room.

I went over it all again. Trying to picture every stage of it. Trying to get inside Winter's complex mind. My head started to swim. I realised then that I was terribly tired.

Another half-hour passed and I almost fell asleep in the chair. I must have dozed off after that, because the next thing I knew the phone was ringing madly and I was making no effort to answer it. I shook myself and reached for the receiver.

"I thought you were dead or something," said Elliot. "I've been ringing for ten minutes."

"Sorry. I think I dropped off."

"Well, you were right about Doris getting advice."

"Who gave it to her ?"

He told me and I knew then that my deductions had been right. The satisfaction that swept through me was like a stimulant. I was suddenly wide awake.

"Does that help ?" Elliot was asking.

SHE FELL AMONG ACTORS

"It certainly does."

"Then will you need me any more before to-morrow?"

"I don't think so."

"Good. . . . Doris says I can stay here as there's so much shrapnel falling."

"Oh."

"Yes. I told her about my playing in an amateur production of the *Chinese Bungalow*. . . . I think that makes me eligible." He chuckled. "She's a nice girl when she doesn't talk."

"Don't be late in the morning," I said firmly.

"I won't. . . . It's an ill raid that blows nobody any good, eh, sarge? S'long."

The death of ten thousand Winters would not have impressed him. If ever a man's mind ran in a groove, it was his.

I found my tin hat and walked in the direction of Fleet Street. In my pocket was five pounds, but I was hoping that I would not have to lose it.

The shrapnel was still coming down in handfuls, and there was scarcely anyone in the streets. Occasionally you came upon a warden striding self-importantly along or a constable standing in a doorway, but otherwise there was no sign of life.

Fleet Street was a black shroud, illumined every now and then by a sweeping searchlight. The sudden change from the dark to the light and back again was very disconcerting. I found myself stumbling over pavements, stepping up to them when they weren't there and missing them when they were.

My heart was thudding violently, and it wasn't on account of the air raid. Normally I would have been pretty scared of that, too, but I was filled with a nervous excitement that left no room for anything else. I felt that I knew now who had killed Winter.

I wasn't sure, of course. There were still large gaps in the evidence. That's why I hadn't told anyone, not even Elliot, but had kept it to myself like a small child. I was afraid lest I might be wrong.

I climbed the steps to Stuart's place and knocked on the door.

"Well, well," he said as he let me in. "How goes the war?"

"Noisy."

"Are they dropping any incendiaries?"

"Haven't noticed any."

"Because, technically speaking, I'm supposed to be fire-watching."

He led me inside. His chaotic office-cum-bed sitting-room was bathed in a ghostly yellow glow from four candles that were stuck in old tobacco tins.

"Rather mediæval," he said, with a smile. "A snooper from the electric corporation crept in while I wasn't looking. I'd been holding the fort against them for weeks, too." He sat down in a chair and beckoned me to a cane contraption that looked not very safe. I let myself into it gingerly.

"Tell me," he went on, "have you solved the case?"

"I think so."

"You know who killed Winter?"

I nodded.

"Then I don't get my five pounds." He pushed the lock of dark hair back from his forehead. "Or perhaps you haven't enough evidence to sway the inquest? I think the bet was based on that, wasn't it?"

We were interrupted by a loud voice shouting "Mr. Jennings!"

"Oh, damn," said Stuart. "That's my fellow fire-watcher. He'll be wanting me to go and relieve him. . . . Do you mind if we continue our discussion upstairs?"

"Okay," I said.

He grabbed a grey tin hat and we clambered up two floors of stone steps and reached a ladder that took us on to the roof. A man was waiting there, staring at the sky which was still being split by gunfire.

"I'll go and get some grub if you don't mind taking over for a bit," said the man.

"Not at all," replied Stuart.

The man disappeared down the ladder and we crossed the roof and found a seat on the buttress of a chimney stack. A mass of dishevelled buildings lay around us. To the right was Fleet Street, to the left Chancery Lane. The periodic flashes silhouetted the big newspaper offices and cast a glistening sheen on the black glass of the *Express*. It was rather like a giant firework display.

"Now, tell me about the case," said Stuart.

"Not much to tell. You know it already."

SHE FELL AMONG ACTORS

"That's true." He laughed. "But what I'm really interested in is the five pounds. You've no idea how hard up I am."

"Look. If you cared to co-operate I might find five pounds for you."

"But you'll never get a verdict. Sir Adrian'll look after Christine."

"Christine?"

"Yes, she killed Winter. Wasn't that the solution you reached?"

"No," I said.

"I told you that you would go astray, didn't I? Christine killed him to save her face and the legend of Winter the Great. You see, Winter was going off with Doris."

"I know."

"Well, then, it's obvious. But you'll never bring her into court." Stuart's face was a smudge under the tin hat.

"Christine didn't kill Winter," I said slowly.

"Then who did?"

I peered at him. "You did, Stuart."

"Oh, now, my dear fellow——"

"You killed Winter. All along you've known too much about this case. You've had information that could only have been got from the inside. You've played a game. The biography, the bet, and your reporting on the death were all part of it."

He didn't move, but I felt his eyes on me.

"Interesting. And have you got a case?"

"I have. I'll tell you if you like."

"Do. I'm partial to fairy stories." The voice was bitterly sarcastic.

"You've always been intrigued by Winter. As you admitted to me once, famous people have a fascination for you. Quite by chance you discovered that Winter went to 'The Bells' as a sort of escape from the other world in which he lived. You went there, too. At that time you had an ambition to be a playwright. You've had several ambitions at various periods, the motivating force behind them all was your desire for money. You wanted it for the power and position it would give you. You cared nothing for the theatre. You merely wanted to use it as a vehicle for building up Stuart Jennings."

"This is amusing," he said. "Is there any more?"

"Plenty. . . . You wrote some plays and one night in 'The Bells' you got into conversation with Winter. You mentioned the plays and he offered to read them. You used a feminine pseudonym—Thelma Kingston. Possibly because you thought it was easier to talk about them if people imagined they were written by someone else.

"It was silly of you to try and provide an alibi for those plays. Elliot saw the woman whose address you gave me. She stuck to the story you had given her, *but she didn't know very much about the plays*. If she had known that a murder hung on their identification she mightn't have been so ready to pretend they were hers.

"There was no need for you to do that. I had forgotten all about Thelma Kingston when you rang up and gave me the address. That act is typical of the things which have put me on your track. At every turn you have overdone it. You couldn't leave well alone. You were so conceited that you persisted in being a central figure in the case. If you had retired into the background not a shred of suspicion could have touched you."

"You're steering very close to libel," he observed.

"There's no one else present," I pointed out. "And what I am telling you I have told no one. . . . Well, your vanity was hurt that Winter did not even mention the plays again. Finally, you asked him about them and his comments were scathing and bordering on the obscene. You were filled with a deep hatred of him. He had made you feel small. He was somebody and you were nobody. You took a malicious pleasure in discovering all you could about him. Then when he was in 'The Bells' you sat and watched him, soothing your ego with the knowledge that you could expose the idol's feet of clay at any time you chose.

"You learnt that he was lavishing his attentions on Doris. You learnt too, that he was planning to leave his wife and go off with her. In a burst of confidence Doris told you one day that Winter had made a will in her favour. From that moment you started scheming. If Winter died, Doris would come into his money, and Doris was a simple, dumb creature. She would be easy to handle.

"There was nothing to connect you and Doris. You merely knew each other. That was all. You planned that it should stay that way until some time after Winter's death. Then you would descend on her and proceed to get your hooks

SHE FELL AMONG ACTORS

on the money. You might have to marry her to do this, but that didn't trouble you.

"It was a fantastic idea, but it appealed to you. A murder seemingly without motive. Doris was in a sense an accomplice but she never knew it. There was no arrangement between you. Nothing. Your tracks were perfectly covered.

"You had heard about Winter's bath episode in America and how he had nearly died. You decided that this was the best way to kill him. You knew, too, that the house at Hampstead was empty. I imagine you planned to inveigle Winter there. It would be easy. He was rehearsing for a new play and you knew where to get hold of him. But your vanity wouldn't allow you to leave it at that. You had to send those two pages of *Macbeth* to Winter. It amused you, and what had started as a cool, planned murder for money, became a game that you enjoyed playing.

"Last Friday you were in 'The Bells' when Winter was there. You overheard him saying he had to go to the house in Hampstead. That relieved you of the necessity of enticing him there. When Winter left you did not follow immediately. You waited. You were very cautious. Finally, you arrived at the house and got in through a window, closing it after you, thus unconsciously frustrating the plans of a gentleman called Ernie, who was going to use the window to stage a robbery.

"I expect Janet was still with Winter. You waited until she had gone and then you crept to the bedroom. Winter had passed out into one of his paralytic states. It made things simple. You undressed him, filled the bath with water, and then placed him in it. The impact with the water brought him round and he struggled. You slammed his head against the back of the bath, knocking him unconscious. He subsided and you pushed his head under the water."

Stuart interrupted with a hard laugh. "This is the best piece of fiction I have ever heard. It's rather weak on the factual side, though. You're inferring a great deal. . . Still, you're not serious, are you?"

"I am very serious."

"Then I suppose I should be annoyed. But, really, it's all so disarming."

"The best is yet to come," I said. "Having completed your task you left the house. You were careful not to be seen."

You arrived back here perfectly safe. You had finished. There was nothing more for you to do but to sit back and wait.

"Had you done that, we wouldn't be sitting on this roof to-night and I wouldn't be telling you this.

"But, once more, you couldn't leave well alone. You liked the sense of power the crime gave you. It seemed dull to lie low and wait. You wanted to move the characters around a bit, to make them come and go at your bidding. So you conceived the idea of sending telegrams to Winter's brother, Sir Adrian, to Christine, and to Gerald Carson. You wanted them to find Winter on Saturday night.

"It worked out better than you imagined. Christine was the first to arrive. She found her husband dead and she was in a dreadful panic. Sir Adrian came to her rescue. He fixed an alibi for her making out that Winter had been seen alive in the house by all three of them. Each agreed to the false story because each was frightened of being dragged into the tragedy.

"Again, it was the cue to stop. But you wouldn't accept it.

"You were dying to tell somebody how clever you'd been. Of course, you couldn't do that. So you satisfied your urge by calling on me and by reporting on the death. You enjoyed taking me to 'The Bells.' It was all you could do to stop yourself blurting out the truth. You took refuge under a cloak of omniscience, purposely trying to mystify me. You longed to talk about Winter and you gave me the assistance of your extensive knowledge of the man. It didn't seem to occur to you that that knowledge alone was highly suspicious.

"So you went from bad to worse. Next came the idea of the biography. Harmless in itself, but damning when added to the chain you had started.

"You saw that things were not going quite as you expected. Sir Adrian was acting like a clan. There was a great danger that Doris' will would be swept aside, and you couldn't rely on her to force the issue. So you rang her up and suggested that she telephone Sir Adrian. She was vague as usual, and you advised her to meet Sir Adrian at a hotel somewhere and not to let Ben know anything about it. That was foolish of you. It destroyed for ever that casual role of onlooker which you had vamped up.

"The other stupid thing you did was sending me that

anonymous note saying that Winter died on Saturday. It was pointless but it fitted in with this terrible urge of not wanting to be left out of anything, of overdoing all your effects. Betting me five pounds on the case was another unnecessary action, but I expect it gave you a great kick." I stopped speaking and watched him.

The raid was petering out. The planes were fewer and the gunfire was spaced between longer periods of quiet. It had been a very small affair.

"Is that all?" he asked presently. "It's not exactly a case, is it?" Calmly he lit a cigarette. "It would never stand up in a court. Just as well for me."

"It won't stand up at this minute, but there's plenty of time."

"But the inquest is to-morrow morning."

"I can get an open verdict if I fight for it. I don't mind being called over the coals for doing so, either. Then I can make investigations at my leisure. Slowly I can strengthen my case until it's cast iron, until there isn't a loophole left. And you won't be able to do a thing about it. Because there'll only be the two of us who know the truth."

"It all sounds very melodramatic."

"You won't be able to touch me with libel because I shan't divulge any information until everything's complete. It might take a year. It might take two. Always haunting you will be the knowledge that I am gradually catching up. And you won't have the ten thousand to build a legal wall for yourself, because I'll keep an eye on Doris as well. It will be a sort of slow march to the gallows. . . ."

That rang a bell. He shivered.

"It's cold," he said, getting up and walking a few paces.

No more words were spoken for several minutes. I sat on the brick buttress. He stood a little distance away.

Presently he turned. "You don't think you can get away with this bluff, do you? You're just mad because you can't get a case and you're trying to frame it on to me."

He was a dim figure in the half-light that was gradually giving place to the dawn.

I didn't answer him.

"I can prove that I didn't kill Winter. I'll show you something that I didn't intend to show anyone. Here a moment."

I walked over to him. He fumbled in his pocket.

Suddenly his hand shot out and caught my arm. Too late I realised his scheme. He meant to push me off the roof. I would plunge to my death in the street below and it would be considered an accident. I could almost visualise the head-ck." lines. FIREWATCHER FALLS FROM ROOF.

I felt myself slipping forward. The guttered edge of the roof came into view, and I was still moving. Frantically I thrust out my arms to save myself. They clawed air for what seemed like five minutes. Then they contacted something soft. Stuart's coat. My fingers gripped and I held on.

We both toppled. Then his foot became caged in mine and fell heavily. Catching hold of his coat had stopped me from going right over. I had managed to regain my balance. But he continued to fall.

He slid over the side of the roof and I hung on to his coat. But the material wouldn't take the strain of a dead weight. It ripped across and the next second I was holding a square of tweed and Stuart was hurtling to the roadway.

Later the doctor told me he must have died instantaneously.

For two hours before the inquest I was closeted with McKay, my superior officer. I had searched Stuart's room and found sufficient to back up my story. Now that the thing was over I was tired. I wanted to have done with it. But there were further conferences as to what should be done at the inquest and, in the end, Sir Adrian's plea for secrecy won the day. It is not easy to convict a man who's dead anyhow. So a simple statement was made, involving one very deeply and a verdict of accidental death was unhesitatingly returned.

In the afternoon they buried Winter. The church was crowded. Everyone seemed to be there, including Ben and his. People lined the outside of the church, too. Winter would have disapproved strongly of all that pomp and display.

But Christine was in her glory! For her the game had only just begun. Through the years she would keep the actor's memory alight, preserve the romantic fabrication that she had built round him. She would make Winter's talent joyful inspiration instead of the millstone it had really been. And do legends spring up.

The next day John celebrated his first birthday. and Lewis came. And Elliot brought Doris. She vacant as usual, but Janet was quite sweet to her. was no doubt she had taken a fancy to Elliot. He told that he was teaching her the deaf-and-dumb alphabet. in all other departments I gathered she was well a standard. In fact, he told me that . . . But no. A says it's not fit for repetition.

THE END



